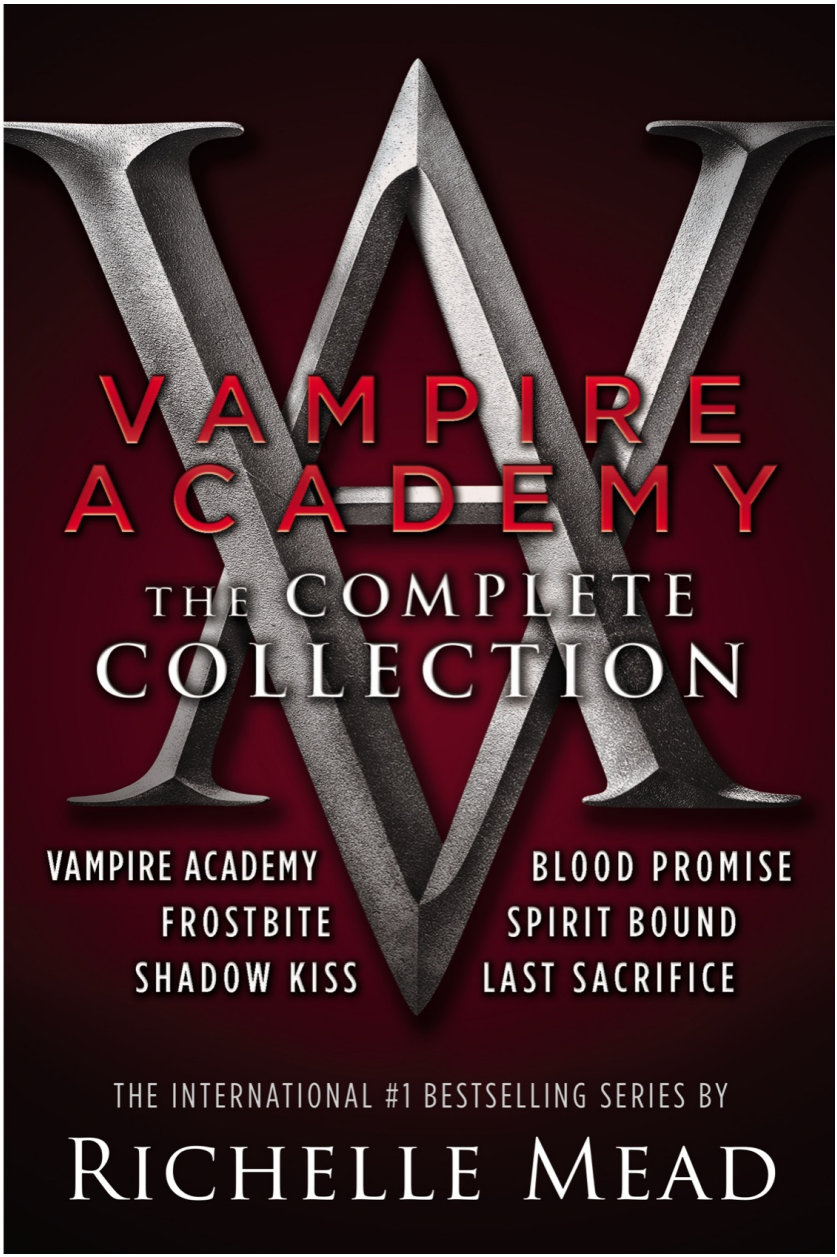
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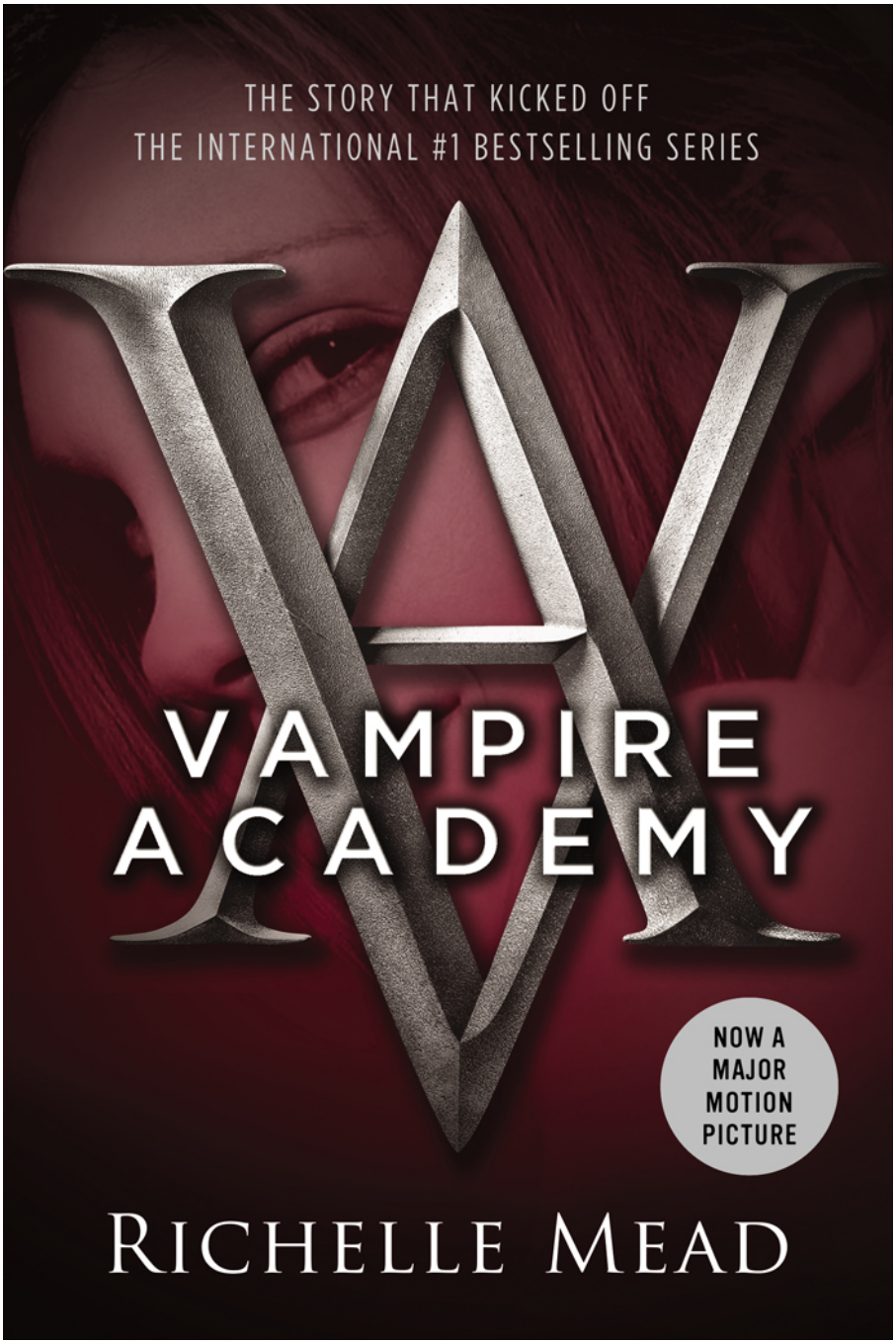
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VAMPIRE ACADEMY

RICHELLE MEAD

Vampire Academy

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ONE

I FELT HER FEAR BEFORE I heard her screams.

Her nightmare pulsed into me, shaking me out of my own dream, which had had something to do with a beach and some hot guy rubbing suntan oil on me. Images—hers, not mine—tumbled through my mind: fire and blood, the smell of smoke, the twisted metal of a car. The pictures wrapped around me, suffocating me, until some rational part of my brain reminded me that this wasn't *my* dream.

I woke up, strands of long, dark hair sticking to my forehead.

Lissa lay in her bed, thrashing and screaming. I bolted out of mine, quickly crossing the few feet that separated us.

"Liss," I said, shaking her. "Liss, wake up."

Her screams dropped off, replaced by soft whimpers. "Andre," she moaned. "Oh God."

I helped her sit up. "Liss, you aren't there anymore. Wake up."

After a few moments, her eyes fluttered open, and in the dim lighting, I could see a flicker of consciousness start to take over. Her frantic breathing slowed, and she leaned into me, resting her head against my shoulder. I put an arm around her and ran a hand over her hair.

"It's okay," I told her gently. "Everything's okay."

"I had that dream."

"Yeah. I know."

We sat like that for several minutes, not saying anything else. When I felt her emotions calm down, I leaned over to the nightstand between our beds and turned on the lamp. It glowed dimly, but neither of us really needed much to see by. Attracted by the light, our housemate's cat, Oscar, leapt up onto the sill of the open window.

He gave me a wide berth—animals don't like dhampirs, for whatever reason—but jumped onto the bed and rubbed his head against Lissa, purring softly. Animals didn't have a problem with Moroi, and they all loved Lissa in particular. Smiling, she scratched his chin, and I felt her calm further.

"When did we last do a feeding?" I asked, studying her face. Her fair skin was paler than usual. Dark circles hung under her eyes, and there was an air of frailty about her. School had been hectic this week, and I couldn't remember the last time I'd given her blood. "It's been like . . . more than two days, hasn't it? Three? Why didn't you say anything?"

She shrugged and wouldn't meet my eyes. "You were busy. I didn't want to

—”

“Screw that,” I said, shifting into a better position. No wonder she seemed so weak. Oscar, not wanting me any closer, leapt down and returned to the window, where he could watch at a safe distance. “Come on. Let’s do this.”

“Rose—”

“Come *on*. It’ll make you feel better.”

I tilted my head and tossed my hair back, baring my neck. I saw her hesitate, but the sight of my neck and what it offered proved too powerful. A hungry expression crossed her face, and her lips parted slightly, exposing the fangs she normally kept hidden while living among humans. Those fangs contrasted oddly with the rest of her features. With her pretty face and pale blond hair, she looked more like an angel than a vampire.

As her teeth neared my bare skin, I felt my heart race with a mix of fear and anticipation. I always hated feeling the latter, but it was nothing I could help, a weakness I couldn’t shake.

Her fangs bit into me, hard, and I cried out at the brief flare of pain. Then it faded, replaced by a wonderful, golden joy that spread through my body. It was better than any of the times I’d been drunk or high. Better than sex—or so I imagined, since I’d never done it. It was a blanket of pure, refined pleasure, wrapping me up and promising everything would be right in the world. On and on it went. The chemicals in her saliva triggered an endorphin rush, and I lost track of the world, lost track of who I was.

Then, regretfully, it was over. It had taken less than a minute.

She pulled back, wiping her hand across her lips as she studied me. “You okay?”

“I . . . yeah.” I lay back on the bed, dizzy from the blood loss. “I just need to sleep it off. I’m fine.”

Her pale, jade-green eyes watched me with concern. She stood up. “I’m going to get you something to eat.”

My protests came awkwardly to my lips, and she left before I could get out a sentence. The buzz from her bite had lessened as soon as she broke the connection, but some of it still lingered in my veins, and I felt a goofy smile cross my lips. Turning my head, I glanced up at Oscar, still sitting in the window.

“You don’t know what you’re missing,” I told him.

His attention was on something outside. Hunkering down into a crouch, he puffed out his jet-black fur. His tail started twitching.

My smile faded, and I forced myself to sit up. The world spun, and I waited for it to right itself before trying to stand. When I managed it, the dizziness set in again and this time refused to leave. Still, I felt okay enough to stumble to the window and peer out with Oscar. He eyed me warily, scooted over a little, and then returned to whatever had held his attention.

A warm breeze—unseasonably warm for a Portland fall—played with my hair as I leaned out. The street was dark and relatively quiet. It was three in the morning, just about the only time a college campus settled down, at least somewhat. The house in which we’d rented a room for the past eight months sat on a residential street with old, mismatched houses. Across the road, a streetlight flickered, nearly ready to burn out. It still cast enough light for me

to make out the shapes of cars and buildings. In our own yard, I could see the silhouettes of trees and bushes.

And a man watching me.

I jerked back in surprise. A figure stood by a tree in the yard, about thirty feet away, where he could easily see through the window. He was close enough that I probably could have thrown something and hit him. He was certainly close enough that he could have seen what Lissa and I had just done.

The shadows covered him so well that even with my heightened sight, I couldn't make out any of his features, save for his height. He was tall. Really tall. He stood there for just a moment, barely discernible, and then stepped back, disappearing into the shadows cast by the trees on the far side of the yard. I was pretty sure I saw someone else move nearby and join him before the blackness swallowed them both.

Whoever these figures were, Oscar didn't like them. Not counting me, he usually got along with most people, growing upset only when someone posed an immediate danger. The guy outside hadn't done anything threatening to Oscar, but the cat had sensed something, something that put him on edge.

Something similar to what he always sensed in me.

Icy fear raced through me, almost—but not quite—eradicating the lovely bliss of Lissa's bite. Backing up from the window, I jerked on a pair of jeans that I found on the floor, nearly falling over in the process. Once they were on, I grabbed my coat and Lissa's, along with our wallets. Shoving my feet into the first shoes I saw, I headed out the door.

Downstairs, I found her in the cramped kitchen, rummaging through the refrigerator. One of our housemates, Jeremy, sat at the table, hand on his forehead as he stared sadly at a calculus book. Lissa regarded me with surprise.

"You shouldn't be up."

"We have to go. Now."

Her eyes widened, and then a moment later, understanding clicked in. "Are you . . . really? Are you sure?"

I nodded. I couldn't explain how I knew for sure. I just did.

Jeremy watched us curiously. "What's wrong?"

An idea came to mind. "Liss, get his car keys."

He looked back and forth between us. "What are you—"

Lissa unhesitatingly walked over to him. Her fear poured into me through our psychic bond, but there was something else too: her complete faith that I would take care of everything, that we would be safe. Like always, I hoped I was worthy of that kind of trust.

She smiled broadly and gazed directly into his eyes. For a moment, Jeremy just stared, still confused, and then I saw the thrall seize him. His eyes glazed over, and he regarded her adoringly.

"We need to borrow your car," she said in a gentle voice. "Where are your keys?"

He smiled, and I shivered. I had a high resistance to compulsion, but I could still feel its effects when it was directed at another person. That, and I'd been taught my entire life that using it was wrong. Reaching into his pocket, Jeremy handed over a set of keys hanging on a large red key chain.

“Thank you,” said Lissa. “And where is it parked?”

“Down the street,” he said dreamily. “At the corner. By Brown.” Four blocks away.

“Thank you,” she repeated, backing up. “As soon as we leave, I want you to go back to studying. Forget you ever saw us tonight.”

He nodded obligingly. I got the impression he would have walked off a cliff for her right then if she’d asked. All humans were susceptible to compulsion, but Jeremy appeared weaker than most. That came in handy right now.

“Come on,” I told her. “We’ve got to move.”

We stepped outside, heading toward the corner he’d named. I was still dizzy from the bite and kept stumbling, unable to move as quickly as I wanted. Lissa had to catch hold of me a few times to stop me from falling. All the time, that anxiety rushed into me from her mind. I tried my best to ignore it; I had my own fears to deal with.

“Rose . . . what are we going to do if they catch us?” she whispered.

“They won’t,” I said fiercely. “I won’t let them.”

“But if they’ve found us—”

“They found us before. They didn’t catch us then. We’ll just drive over to the train station and go to L.A. They’ll lose the trail.”

I made it sound simple. I always did, even though there was nothing simple about being on the run from the people we’d grown up with. We’d been doing it for two years, hiding wherever we could and just trying to finish high school. Our senior year had just started, and living on a college campus had seemed safe. We were so close to freedom.

She said nothing more, and I felt her faith in me surge up once more. This was the way it had always been between us. I was the one who took action, who made sure things happened—sometimes recklessly so. She was the more reasonable one, the one who thought things out and researched them extensively before acting. Both styles had their uses, but at the moment, recklessness was called for. We didn’t have time to hesitate.

Lissa and I had been best friends ever since kindergarten, when our teacher had paired us together for writing lessons. Forcing five-year-olds to spell *Vasilisa Dragomir* and *Rosemarie Hathaway* was beyond cruel, and we’d—or rather, *I’d*—responded appropriately. I’d chucked my book at our teacher and called her a fascist bastard. I hadn’t known what those words meant, but I’d known how to hit a moving target.

Lissa and I had been inseparable ever since.

“Do you hear that?” she asked suddenly.

It took me a few seconds to pick up what her sharper senses already had. Footsteps, moving fast. I grimaced. We had two more blocks to go.

“We’ve got to run for it,” I said, catching hold of her arm.

“But you can’t—”

“*Run*.”

It took every ounce of my willpower not to pass out on the sidewalk. My body didn’t want to run after losing blood or while still metabolizing the effects of her saliva. But I ordered my muscles to stop their bitching and clung to Lissa as our feet pounded against the concrete. Normally I could have outrun her without any extra effort—particularly since she was barefoot—but

tonight, she was all that held me upright.

The pursuing footsteps grew louder, closer. Black stars danced before my eyes. Ahead of us, I could make out Jeremy's green Honda. Oh God, if we could just make it—

Ten feet from the car, a man stepped directly into our path. We came to a screeching halt, and I jerked Lissa back by her arm. It was *him*, the guy I'd seen across the street watching me. He was older than us, maybe mid-twenties, and as tall as I'd figured, probably six-six or six-seven. And under different circumstances—say, when he wasn't holding up our desperate escape—I would have thought he was hot. Shoulder-length brown hair, tied back in a short ponytail. Dark brown eyes. A long brown coat—a duster, I thought it was called.

But his hotness was irrelevant now. He was only an obstacle keeping Lissa and me away from the car and our freedom. The footsteps behind us slowed, and I knew our pursuers had caught up. Off to the sides, I detected more movement, more people closing in. God. They'd sent almost a dozen guardians to retrieve us. I couldn't believe it. The queen herself didn't travel with that many.

Panicked and not entirely in control of my higher reasoning, I acted out of instinct. I pressed up to Lissa, keeping her behind me and away from the man who appeared to be the leader.

"Leave her alone," I growled. "Don't touch her."

His face was unreadable, but he held out his hands in what was apparently supposed to be some sort of calming gesture, like I was a rabid animal he was planning to sedate.

"I'm not going to—"

He took a step forward. Too close.

I attacked him, leaping out in an offensive maneuver I hadn't used in two years, not since Lissa and I had run away. The move was stupid, another reaction born of instinct and fear. And it was hopeless. He was a skilled guardian, not a novice who hadn't finished his training. He also wasn't weak and on the verge of passing out.

And man, was he fast. I'd forgotten how fast guardians could be, how they could move and strike like cobras. He knocked me off as though brushing away a fly, and his hands slammed into me and sent me backwards. I don't think he meant to strike that hard—probably just intended to keep me away—but my lack of coordination interfered with my ability to respond. Unable to catch my footing, I started to fall, heading straight toward the sidewalk at a twisted angle, hip-first. It was going to hurt. A *lot*.

Only it didn't.

Just as quickly as he'd blocked me, the man reached out and caught my arm, keeping me upright. When I'd steadied myself, I noticed he was staring at me—or, more precisely, at my neck. Still disoriented, I didn't get it right away. Then, slowly, my free hand reached up to the side of my throat and lightly touched the wound Lissa had made earlier. When I pulled my fingers back, I saw slick, dark blood on my skin. Embarrassed, I shook my hair so that it fell forward around my face. My hair was thick and long and completely covered my neck. I'd grown it out for precisely this reason.

The guy's dark eyes lingered on the now-covered bite a moment longer and then met mine. I returned his look defiantly and quickly jerked out of his hold. He let me go, though I knew he could have restrained me all night if he'd wanted. Fighting the nauseating dizziness, I backed toward Lissa again, bracing myself for another attack. Suddenly, her hand caught hold of mine. "Rose," she said quietly. "Don't."

Her words had no effect on me at first, but calming thoughts gradually began to settle in my mind, coming across through the bond. It wasn't exactly compulsion—she wouldn't use that on me—but it was effectual, as was the fact that we were hopelessly outnumbered and outclassed. Even I knew struggling would be pointless. The tension left my body, and I sagged in defeat.

Sensing my resignation, the man stepped forward, turning his attention to Lissa. His face was calm. He swept her a bow and managed to look graceful doing it, which surprised me considering his height. "My name is Dimitri Belikov," he said. I could hear a faint Russian accent. "I've come to take you back to St. Vladimir's Academy, Princess."

TWO

MY HATRED NOTWITHSTANDING, I had to admit Dimitri Belikov was pretty smart. After they'd carted us off to the airport to and onto the Academy's private jet, he'd taken one look at the two of us whispering and ordered us separated.

"Don't let them talk to each other," he warned the guardian who escorted me to the back of the plane. "Five minutes together, and they'll come up with an escape plan."

I shot him a haughty look and stormed off down the aisle. Never mind the fact we *had* been planning escape.

As it was, things didn't look good for our heroes—or heroines, rather. Once we were in the air, our odds of escape dropped further. Even supposing a miracle occurred and I did manage to take out all ten guardians, we'd sort of have a problem in getting off the plane. I figured they might have parachutes aboard somewhere, but in the unlikely event I'd be able to operate one, there was still that little issue of survival, seeing as we'd probably land somewhere in the Rocky Mountains.

No, we weren't getting off this plane until it landed in backwoods Montana. I'd have to think of something then, something that involved getting past the Academy's magical wards and ten times as many guardians. Yeah. No problem.

Although Lissa sat at the front with the Russian guy, her fear sang back to me, pounding inside my head like a hammer. My concern for her cut into my fury. They couldn't take her back *there*, not to that place. I wondered if Dimitri might have hesitated if he could feel what I did and if he knew what I knew. Probably not. He didn't care.

As it was, her emotions grew so strong that for a moment, I had the disorienting sensation of sitting in her seat—in her *skin* even. It happened sometimes, and without much warning, she'd pull me right into her head. Dimitri's tall frame sat beside me, and my hand—*her* hand—gripped a bottle of water. He leaned forward to pick up something, revealing six tiny symbols tattooed on the back of his neck: *molnija* marks. They looked like two streaks of jagged lightning crossing in an *X* symbol. One for each Strigoi he'd killed. Above them was a twisting line, sort of like a snake, that marked him as a guardian. The promise mark.

Blinking, I fought against her and shifted back into my own head with a grimace. I hated when that happened. Feeling Lissa's emotions was one thing,

but slipping into her was something we both despised. She saw it as an invasion of privacy, so I usually didn't tell her when it happened. Neither of us could control it. It was another effect of the bond, a bond neither of us fully understood. Legends existed about psychic links between guardians and their Moroi, but the stories had never mentioned anything like this. We fumbled through it as best we could.

Near the end of the flight, Dimitri walked back to where I sat and traded places with the guardian beside me. I pointedly turned away, staring out the window absentmindedly.

Several moments of silence passed. Finally, he said, "Were you really going to attack all of us?"

I didn't answer.

"Doing that . . . protecting her like that—it was very brave." He paused. "*Stupid*, but still brave. Why did you even try it?"

I glanced over at him, brushing my hair out of my face so I could look him levelly in the eye. "Because I'm her guardian." I turned back toward the window.

After another quiet moment, he stood up and returned to the front of the jet.

When we landed, Lissa and I had no choice but to let the commandos drive us out to the Academy. Our car stopped at the gate, and our driver spoke with guards who verified we weren't Strigoi about to go off on a killing spree. After a minute, they let us pass on through the wards and up to the Academy itself. It was around sunset—the start of the vampiric day—and the campus lay wrapped in shadows.

It probably looked the same, sprawling and gothic. The Moroi were big on tradition; nothing ever changed with them. This school wasn't as old as the ones back in Europe, but it had been built in the same style. The buildings boasted elaborate, almost churchlike architecture, with high peaks and stone carvings. Wrought iron gates enclosed small gardens and doorways here and there. After living on a college campus, I had a new appreciation for just how much this place resembled a university more than a typical high school.

We were on the secondary campus, which was divided into lower and upper schools. Each was built around a large open quadrangle decorated with stone paths and enormous, century-old trees. We were going toward the upper school's quad, which had academic buildings on one side, while dhampir dormitories and the gym sat opposite. Moroi dorms sat on one of the other ends, and opposite them were the administrative buildings that also served the lower school. Younger students lived on the primary campus, farther to the west.

Around all the campuses was space, space, and more space. We were in Montana, after all, miles away from any real city. The air felt cool in my lungs and smelled of pine and wet, decaying leaves. Overgrown forests ringed the perimeters of the Academy, and during the day, you could see mountains rising up in the distance.

As we walked into the main part of the upper school, I broke from my guardian and ran up to Dimitri.

"Hey, Comrade."

He kept walking and wouldn't look at me. "You want to talk now?

"Are you taking us to Kirova?"

"*Headmistress* Kirova," he corrected. On the other side of him, Lissa shot me a look that said, *Don't start something*.

"Headmistress. Whatever. She's still a self-righteous old bit—"

My words faded as the guardians led us through a set of doors—straight into the commons. I sighed. Were these people *really* so cruel? There had to be at least a dozen ways to get to Kirova's office, and they were taking us right through the center of the commons.

And it was breakfast time.

Novice guardians—dhampirs like me—and Moroi sat together, eating and socializing, faces alight with whatever current gossip held the Academy's attention. When we entered, the loud buzz of conversation stopped instantly, like someone had flipped a switch. Hundreds of sets of eyes swiveled toward us.

I returned the stares of my former classmates with a lazy grin, trying to get a sense as to whether things had changed. Nope. Didn't seem like it. Camille Conta still looked like the prim, perfectly groomed bitch I remembered, still the self-appointed leader of the Academy's royal Moroi cliques. Off to the side, Lissa's gawky near-cousin Natalie watched with wide eyes, as innocent and naive as before.

And on the other side of the room . . . well, that was interesting. Aaron. Poor, poor Aaron, who'd no doubt had his heart broken when Lissa left. He still looked as cute as ever—maybe more so now—with those same golden looks that complemented hers so well. His eyes followed her every move. Yes. Definitely not over her. It was sad, really, because Lissa had never really been all that into him. I think she'd gone out with him simply because it seemed like the expected thing to do.

But what I found most interesting was that Aaron had apparently found a way to pass the time without her. Beside him, holding his hand, was a Moroi girl who looked about eleven but had to be older, unless he'd become a pedophile during our absence. With plump little cheeks and blond ringlets, she looked like a porcelain doll. A very pissed off and evil porcelain doll. She gripped his hand tightly and shot Lissa a look of such burning hatred that it stunned me. What the hell was that all about? She was no one I knew. Just a jealous girlfriend, I guessed. I'd be pissed too if my guy was watching someone else like that.

Our walk of shame mercifully ended, though our new setting—Headmistress Kirova's office—didn't really improve things. The old hag looked exactly like I remembered, sharp-nosed and gray-haired. She was tall and slim, like most Moroi, and had always reminded me of a vulture. I knew her well because I'd spent a lot of time in her office.

Most of our escorts left us once Lissa and I were seated, and I felt a little less like a prisoner. Only Alberta, the captain of the school's guardians, and Dimitri stayed. They took up positions along the wall, looking stoic and terrifying, just as their job description required.

Kirova fixed her angry eyes on us and opened her mouth to begin what would no doubt be a major bitch session. A deep, gentle voice stopped her.

"Vasilisa."

Startled, I realized there was someone else in the room. I hadn't noticed. Careless for a guardian, even a novice one. With a great deal of effort, Victor Dashkov rose from a corner chair. *Prince* Victor Dashkov. Lissa sprang up and ran to him, throwing her arms around his frail body.

"Uncle," she whispered. She sounded on the verge of tears as she tightened her grip.

With a small smile, he gently patted her back. "You have no idea how glad I am to see you safe, Vasilisa." He looked toward me. "And you too, Rose."

I nodded back, trying to hide how shocked I was. He'd been sick when we left, but this—this was *horrible*. He was Natalie's father, only about forty or so, but he looked twice that age. Pale. Withered. Hands shaking. My heart broke watching him. With all the horrible people in the world, it didn't seem fair that this guy should get a disease that was going to kill him young and ultimately keep him from becoming king.

Although not technically her uncle—the Moroi used family terms very loosely, especially the royals—Victor was a close friend of Lissa's family and had gone out of his way to help her after her parents had died. I liked him; he was the first person I was happy to see here.

Kirova let them have a few more moments and then stiffly drew Lissa back to her seat.

Time for the lecture.

It was a good one—one of Kirova's best, which was saying something. She was a master at them. I swear that was the only reason she'd gone into school administration, because I had yet to see any evidence of her actually *liking* kids. The rant covered the usual topics: responsibility, reckless behavior, self-centeredness. . . . Bleh. I immediately found myself spacing out, alternatively pondering the logistics of escaping through the window in her office.

But when the tirade shifted to me—well, that was when I tuned back in.

"You, Miss Hathaway, broke the most sacred promise among our kind: the promise of a guardian to protect a Moroi. It is a great trust. A trust that you violated by selfishly taking the princess away from here. The Strigoi would love to finish off the Dragomirs; *you* nearly enabled them to do it."

"Rose didn't kidnap me." Lissa spoke before I could, her voice and face calm, despite her uneasy feelings. "I wanted to go. Don't blame her."

Ms. Kirova *tsk*ed at us both and paced the office, hands folded behind her narrow back.

"Miss Dragomir, you could have been the one who orchestrated the entire plan for all I know, but it was still *her* responsibility to make sure you didn't carry it out. If she'd done her duty, she would have notified someone. If she'd done her duty, she would have kept you safe."

I snapped.

"I *did* do my duty!" I shouted, jumping up from my chair. Dimitri and Alberta both flinched but left me alone since I wasn't trying to hit anyone. Yet. "I did keep her safe! I kept her safe when none of *you*"—I made a sweeping gesture around the room—"could do it. I took her away to protect her. I did what I had to do. You certainly weren't going to."

Through the bond, I felt Lissa trying to send me calming messages, again

urging me not to let anger get the best of me. Too late.

Kirova stared at me, her face blank. “Miss Hathaway, forgive me if I fail to see the logic of how taking her out of a heavily guarded, magically secured environment is protecting her. Unless there’s something you aren’t telling us?”

I bit my lip.

“I see. Well, then. By my estimation, the only reason you left—aside from the novelty of it, no doubt—was to avoid the consequences of that horrible, destructive stunt you pulled just before your disappearance.”

“No, that’s not—”

“And that only makes my decision that much easier. As a Moroi, the princess must continue on here at the Academy for her own safety, but we have no such obligations to you. You will be sent away as soon as possible.”

My cockiness dried up. “I . . . what?”

Lissa stood up beside me. “You can’t do that! She’s my guardian.”

“She is no such thing, particularly since she isn’t even a guardian at all. She’s still a novice.”

“But my parents—”

“I know what your parents wanted, God rest their souls, but things have changed. Miss Hathaway is expendable. She doesn’t deserve to be a guardian, and she will leave.”

I stared at Kirova, unable to believe what I was hearing. “Where are you going to send me? To my mom in Nepal? Did she even know I was gone? Or maybe you’ll send me off to my *father*?”

Her eyes narrowed at the bite in that last word. When I spoke again, my voice was so cold, I barely recognized it.

“Or maybe you’re going to try to send me off to be a blood whore. Try that, and we’ll be gone by the end of the day.”

“Miss Hathaway,” she hissed, “you are out of line.”

“They have a bond.” Dimitri’s low, accented voice broke the heavy tension, and we all turned toward him. I think Kirova had forgotten he was there, but I hadn’t. His presence was way too powerful to ignore. He still stood against the wall, looking like some sort of cowboy sentry in that ridiculous long coat of his. He looked at me, not Lissa, his dark eyes staring straight through me. “Rose knows what Vasilisa is feeling. Don’t you?”

I at least had the satisfaction of seeing Kirova caught off guard as she glanced between us and Dimitri. “No . . . that’s impossible. That hasn’t happened in centuries.”

“It’s obvious,” he said. “I suspected as soon as I started watching them.”

Neither Lissa nor I responded, and I averted my eyes from his.

“That is a gift,” murmured Victor from his corner. “A rare and wonderful thing.”

“The best guardians always had that bond,” added Dimitri. “In the stories.”

Kirova’s outrage returned. “Stories that are centuries old,” she exclaimed. “Surely you aren’t suggesting we let her stay at the Academy after everything she’s done?”

He shrugged. “She might be wild and disrespectful, but if she has potential —”

“Wild and disrespectful?” I interrupted. “Who the hell are you anyway?

Outsourced help?"

"Guardian Belikov is the princess's guardian now," said Kirova. "Her *sanctioned* guardian."

"You got cheap foreign labor to protect Lissa?"

That was pretty mean of me to say—particularly since most Moroi and their guardians were of Russian or Romanian descent—but the comment seemed cleverer at the time than it really was. And it wasn't like I was one to talk. I might have been raised in the U.S., but my parents were foreign-born. My dhampir mother was Scottish—red-haired, with a ridiculous accent—and I'd been told my Moroi dad was Turkish. That genetic combination had given me skin the same color as the inside of an almond, along with what I liked to think were semi-exotic desert-princess features: big dark eyes and hair so deep brown that it usually looked black. I wouldn't have minded inheriting the red hair, but we take what we get.

Kirova threw her hands up in exasperation and turned to him. "You see? Completely undisciplined! All the psychic bonds and *very* raw potential in the world can't make up for that. A guardian without discipline is worse than no guardian."

"So teach her discipline. Classes just started. Put her back in and get her training again."

"Impossible. She'll still be hopelessly behind her peers."

"No, I won't," I argued. No one listened to me.

"Then give her extra training sessions," he said.

They continued on while the rest of us watched the exchange like it was a Ping-Pong game. My pride was still hurt over the ease with which Dimitri had tricked us, but it occurred to me that he might very well keep me here with Lissa. Better to stay at this hellhole than be without her. Through our bond, I could feel her trickle of hope.

"Who's going to put in the extra time?" demanded Kirova. "You?"

Dimitri's argument came to an abrupt stop. "Well, that's not what I—"

Kirova crossed her arms with satisfaction. "Yes. That's what I thought."

Clearly at a loss, he frowned. His eyes flicked toward Lissa and me, and I wondered what he saw. Two pathetic girls, looking at him with big, pleading eyes? Or two runaways who'd broken out of a high-security school and swiped half of Lissa's inheritance?

"Yes," he said finally. "I can mentor Rose. I'll give her extra sessions along with her normal ones."

"And then what?" retorted Kirova angrily. "She goes unpunished?"

"Find some other way to punish her," answered Dimitri. "Guardian numbers have gone down too much to risk losing another. A girl, in particular."

His unspoken words made me shudder, reminding me of my earlier statement about "blood whores." Few dhampir girls became guardians anymore.

Victor suddenly spoke up from his corner. "I'm inclined to agree with Guardian Belikov. Sending Rose away would be a shame, a waste of talent."

Ms. Kirova stared out her window. It was completely black outside. With the Academy's nocturnal schedule, *morning* and *afternoon* were relative terms. That, and they kept the windows tinted to block out excess light.

When she turned back around, Lissa met her eyes. “Please, Ms. Kirova. Let Rose stay.”

Oh, Lissa, I thought. *Be careful*. Using compulsion on another Moroi was dangerous—particularly in front of witnesses. But Lissa was only using a tiny bit, and we needed all the help we could get. Fortunately, no one seemed to realize what was happening.

I don’t even know if the compulsion made a difference, but finally, Kirova sighed.

“If Miss Hathaway stays, here’s how it will be.” She turned to me. “Your continued enrollment at St. Vladimir’s is strictly probationary. Step out of line *once*, and you’re gone. You will attend all classes and required trainings for novices your age. You will also train with Guardian Belikov in every spare moment you have—before *and* after classes. Other than that, you are banned from all social activities, except meals, and will stay in your dorm. Fail to comply with any of this, and you will be sent . . . away.”

I gave a harsh laugh. “Banned from all social activities? Are you trying to keep us apart?” I nodded toward Lissa. “Afraid we’ll run away again?”

“I’m taking precautions. As I’m sure you recall, you were never properly punished for destroying school property. You have a lot to make up for.” Her thin lips tightened into a straight line. “You are being offered a very generous deal. I suggest you don’t let your attitude endanger it.”

I started to say it wasn’t generous at all, but then I caught Dimitri’s gaze. It was hard to read. He might have been telling me he believed in me. He might have been telling me I was an idiot to keep fighting with Kirova. I didn’t know.

Looking away from him for the second time during the meeting, I stared at the floor, conscious of Lissa beside me and her own encouragement burning in our bond. At long last, I exhaled and glanced back up at the headmistress.

“Fine. I accept.”

THREE

SENDING US STRAIGHT TO CLASS after our meeting seemed beyond cruel, but that's exactly what Kirova did. Lissa was led away and I watched her go, glad the bond would allow me to keep reading her emotional temperature.

They actually sent me to one of the guidance counselors first. He was an ancient Moroi guy, one I remembered from before I'd left. I honestly couldn't believe he was still around. The guy was so freaking old, he should have retired. Or died.

The visit took all of five minutes. He said nothing about my return and asked a few questions about what classes I'd taken in Chicago and Portland. He compared those against my old file and hastily scrawled out a new schedule. I took it sullenly and headed out to my first class.

1st Period Advanced Guardian Combat Techniques
2nd Period Bodyguard Theory and Personal Protection 3
3rd Period Weight Training and Conditioning
4th Period Senior Language Arts (Novices)

—Lunch—

5th Period Animal Behavior and Physiology
6th Period Precalculus
7th Period Moroi Culture 4
8th Period Slavic Art

Ugh. I'd forgotten how long the Academy's school day was. Novices and Moroi took separate classes during the first half of the day, which meant I wouldn't see Lissa until after lunch—if we had any afternoon classes together. Most of them were standard senior classes, so I felt my odds were pretty good. Slavic art struck me as the kind of elective no one signed up for, so hopefully they'd stuck her in there too.

Dimitri and Alberta escorted me to the guardians' gym for first period, neither one acknowledging my existence. Walking behind them, I saw how Alberta wore her hair in a short, pixie cut that showed her promise mark and *molnija* marks. A lot of female guardians did this. It didn't matter so much for me now, since my neck had no tattoos yet, but I didn't want to ever cut my hair.

She and Dimitri didn't say anything and walked along almost like it was any other day. When we arrived, the reactions of my peers indicated it was anything but. They were in the middle of setting up when we entered the gym,

and just like in the commons, all eyes fell on me. I couldn't decide if I felt like a rock star or a circus freak.

All right, then. If I was going to be stuck here for a while, I wasn't going to act afraid of them all anymore. Lissa and I had once held this school's respect, and it was time to remind everyone of that. Scanning the staring, openmouthed novices, I looked for a familiar face. Most of them were guys. One caught my eye, and I could barely hold back my grin.

"Hey Mason, wipe the drool off your face. If you're going to think about me naked, do it on your own time."

A few snorts and snickers broke the awed silence, and Mason Ashford snapped out of his haze, giving me a lopsided smile. With red hair that stuck up everywhere and a smattering of freckles, he was nice-looking, though not exactly hot. He was also one of the funniest guys I knew. We'd been good friends back in the day.

"This *is* my time, Hathaway. I'm leading today's session."

"Oh yeah?" I retorted. "Huh. Well, I guess this is a good time to think about me naked, then."

"It's *always* a good a time to think about you naked," added someone nearby, breaking the tension further. Eddie Castile. Another friend of mine.

Dimitri shook his head and walked off, muttering something in Russian that didn't sound complimentary. But as for me . . . well, just like that, I was one of the novices again. They were an easygoing bunch, less focused on pedigree and politics than the Moroi students.

The class engulfed me, and I found myself laughing and seeing those I'd nearly forgotten about. Everyone wanted to know where we'd been; apparently Lissa and I had become legends. I couldn't tell them why we'd left, of course, so I offered up a lot of taunts and wouldn't-you-like-to-knows that served just as well.

The happy reunion lasted a few more minutes before the adult guardian who oversaw the training came over and scolded Mason for neglecting his duties. Still grinning, he barked out orders to everyone, explaining what exercises to start with. Uneasily, I realized I didn't know most of them.

"Come on, Hathaway," he said, taking my arm. "You can be my partner. Let's see what you've been doing all this time."

An hour later, he had his answer.

"Not practicing, huh?"

"Ow," I groaned, momentarily incapable of normal speech.

He extended a hand and helped me up from the mat he'd knocked me down on—about fifty times.

"I hate you," I told him, rubbing a spot on my thigh that was going to have a wicked bruise tomorrow.

"You'd hate me more if I held back."

"Yeah, that's true," I agreed, staggering along as the class put the equipment back.

"You actually did okay."

"What? I just had my ass handed to me."

"Well, of course you did. It's been two years. But hey, you're still walking. That's something." He grinned mockingly.

"Did I mention I hate you?"

He flashed me another smile, which quickly faded to something more serious. "Don't take this the wrong way. . . . I mean, you really are a scrapper, but there's no way you'll be able to take your trials in the spring—"

"They're making me take extra practice sessions," I explained. Not that it mattered. I planned on getting Lissa and me out of here before these practices really became an issue. "I'll be ready."

"Extra sessions with who?"

"That tall guy. Dimitri."

Mason stopped walking and stared at me. "You're putting in extra time with Belikov?"

"Yeah, so what?"

"So the man is a *god*."

"Exaggerate much?" I asked.

"No, I'm serious. I mean, he's all quiet and antisocial usually, but when he fights . . . wow. If you think you're hurting now, you're going to be dead when he's done with you."

Great. Something else to improve my day.

I elbowed him and went on to second period. That class covered the essentials of being a bodyguard and was required for all seniors. Actually, it was the third in a series that had started junior year. That meant I was behind in this class too, but I hoped protecting Lissa in the real world had given me some insight.

Our instructor was Stan Alto, whom we referred to simply as "Stan" behind his back and "Guardian Alto" in formal settings. He was a little older than Dimitri, but not nearly as tall, and he always looked pissed off. Today, that look intensified when he walked into the classroom and saw me sitting there. His eyes widened in mock surprise as he circled the room and came to stand beside my desk.

"What's this? No one told me we had a guest speaker here today. Rose Hathaway. What a privilege! How very *generous* of you to take time out of your busy schedule and share your knowledge with us."

I felt my cheeks burning, but in a great show of self-control, I stopped myself from telling him to fuck off. I'm pretty sure my face must have delivered that message, however, because his sneer increased. He gestured for me to stand up.

"Well, come on, come on. Don't sit there! Come up to the front so you can help me lecture the class."

I sank into my seat. "You don't really mean—"

The taunting smile dried up. "I mean *exactly* what I say, Hathaway. Go to the front of the class."

A thick silence enveloped the room. Stan was a scary instructor, and most of the class was too awed to laugh at my disgrace quite yet. Refusing to crack, I strode up to the front of the room and turned to face the class. I gave them a bold look and tossed my hair over my shoulders, earning a few sympathetic smiles from my friends. I then noticed I had a larger audience than expected. A few guardians—including Dimitri—lingered in the back of the room. Outside the Academy, guardians focused on one-on-one protection. Here,

guardians had a lot more people to protect *and* they had to train the novices. So rather than follow any one person around, they worked shifts guarding the school as a whole and monitoring classes.

"So, Hathaway," said Stan cheerfully, strolling back up to the front with me. "Enlighten us about your protective techniques."

"My . . . techniques?"

"Of course. Because presumably you must have had some sort of plan the rest of us couldn't understand when you took an underage Moroi royal out of the Academy and exposed her to constant Strigoi threats."

It was the Kirova lecture all over again, except with more witnesses.

"We never ran into any Strigoi," I replied stiffly.

"Obviously," he said with a snicker. "I already figured that out, seeing as how you're still alive."

I wanted to shout that maybe I could have defeated a Strigoi, but after getting beat up in the last class, I now suspected I couldn't have survived an attack by Mason, let alone an actual Strigoi.

When I didn't say anything, Stan started pacing in front of the class.

"So what'd you do? How'd you make sure she stayed safe? Did you avoid going out at night?"

"Sometimes." That was true—especially when we'd first run away. We'd relaxed a little after months went by with no attacks.

"*Sometimes*," he repeated in a high-pitched voice, making my answer sound incredibly stupid. "Well then, I suppose you slept during the day and stayed on guard at night."

"Er . . . no."

"No? But that's one of the first things mentioned in the chapter on solo guarding. Oh wait, you wouldn't know that because *you weren't here*."

I swallowed back more swear words. "I watched the area whenever we went out," I said, needing to defend myself.

"Oh? Well that's something. Did you use Carnegie's Quadrant Surveillance Method or the Rotational Survey?"

I didn't say anything.

"Ah. I'm guessing you used the Hathaway Glance-Around-When-You-Remember-To Method."

"No!" I exclaimed angrily. "That's not true. I watched her. She's still alive, isn't she?"

He walked back up to me and leaned toward my face. "Because you got *lucky*."

"Strigoi aren't lurking around every corner out there," I shot back. "It's not like what we've been taught. It's safer than you guys make it sound."

"Safer? *Safer?* We are at war with the Strigoi!" he yelled. I could smell coffee on his breath, he was so close. "One of them could walk right up to you and snap your pretty little neck before you even noticed him—and he'd barely break a sweat doing it. You might have more speed and strength than a Moroi or a human, but you are nothing, *nothing*, compared to a Strigoi. They are deadly, and they are powerful. And do you know what makes them more powerful?"

No way was I going to let this jerk make me cry. Looking away from him, I

tried to focus on something else. My eyes rested on Dimitri and the other guardians. They were watching my humiliation, stone-faced.

"Moroi blood," I whispered.

"What was that?" asked Stan loudly. "I didn't catch it."

I spun back around to face him. "Moroi blood! Moroi blood makes them stronger."

He nodded in satisfaction and took a few steps back. "Yes. It does. It makes them stronger and harder to destroy. They'll kill and drink from a human or dhampir, but they want Moroi blood more than anything else. They seek it. They've turned to the dark side to gain immortality, and they want to do whatever they can to keep that immortality. Desperate Strigoi have attacked Moroi in public. Groups of Strigoi have raided academies exactly like this one. There are Strigoi who have lived for thousands of years and fed off generations of Moroi. They're almost impossible to kill. And *that* is why Moroi numbers are dropping. They aren't strong enough—even with guardians—to protect themselves. Some Moroi don't even see the point of running anymore and are simply turning Strigoi by choice. And as the Moroi disappear . . ."

". . . so do the dhampirs," I finished.

"Well," he said, licking sprayed spit off his lips. "It looks like you learned something after all. Now we'll have to see if you can learn enough to pass this class and qualify for your field experience next semester."

Ouch. I spent the rest of that horrible class—in my seat, thankfully—replaying those last words in my mind. The senior-year field experience was the best part of a novice's education. We'd have no classes for half a semester. Instead, we'd each be assigned a Moroi student to guard and follow around. The adult guardians would monitor us and test us with staged attacks and other threats. How a novice passed that field experience was almost as important as all the rest of her grades combined. It could influence which Moroi she got assigned to after graduation.

And me? There was only one Moroi I wanted.

Two classes later, I finally earned my lunch escape. As I stumbled across campus toward the commons, Dimitri fell into step beside me, not looking particularly godlike—unless you counted his godly good looks.

"I suppose you saw what happened in Stan's class?" I asked, not bothering with titles.

"Yes."

"And you don't think that was unfair?"

"Was he right? Do you think you were fully prepared to protect Vasilisa?"

I looked down at the ground. "I kept her alive," I mumbled.

"How did you do fighting against your classmates today?"

The question was mean. I didn't answer and knew I didn't need to. I'd had another training class after Stan's, and no doubt Dimitri had watched me get beat up there too.

"If you can't fight *them*—"

"Yeah, yeah, I know," I snapped.

He slowed his long stride to match my pain-filled one. "You're strong and fast by nature. You just need to keep yourself trained. Didn't you play any sports while you were gone?"

"Sure," I shrugged. "Now and then."

"You didn't join any teams?"

"Too much work. If I'd wanted to practice that much, I'd have stayed here."

He gave me an exasperated look. "You'll never be able to really protect the princess if you don't hone your skills. You'll always be lacking."

"I'll be able to protect her," I said fiercely.

"You have no guarantees of being assigned to her, you know—for your field experience *or* after you graduate." Dimitri's voice was low and unapologetic. They hadn't given me a warm and fuzzy mentor. "No one wants to waste the bond—but no one's going to give her an inadequate guardian either. If you want to be with her, then you need to work for it. You have your lessons. You have me. Use us or don't. You're an ideal choice to guard Vasilisa when you both graduate—if you can prove you're worthy. I hope you will."

"Lissa, call her Lissa," I corrected. She hated her full name, much preferring the Americanized nickname.

He walked away, and suddenly, I didn't feel like such a badass anymore.

By now, I'd burned up a lot of time leaving class. Most everyone else had long since sprinted inside the commons for lunch, eager to maximize their social time. I'd almost made it back there myself when a voice under the door's overhang called to me.

"Rose?"

Peering in the voice's direction, I caught sight of Victor Dashkov, his kind face smiling at me as he leaned on a cane near the building's wall. His two guardians stood nearby at a polite distance.

"Mr. Dash—er, Your Highness. Hi."

I caught myself just in time, having nearly forgotten Moroi royal terms. I hadn't used them while living among humans. The Moroi chose their rulers from among twelve royal families. The eldest in the family got the title of "prince" or "princess." Lissa had gotten hers because she was the only one left in her line.

"How was your first day?" he asked.

"Not over yet." I tried to think of something conversational. "Are you visiting here for a while?"

"I'll be leaving this afternoon after I say hello to Natalie. When I heard Vasilisa—and you—had returned, I simply had to come see you."

I nodded, not sure what else to say. He was more Lissa's friend than mine.

"I wanted to tell you . . ." He spoke hesitantly. "I understand the gravity of what you did, but I think Headmistress Kirova failed to acknowledge something. You *did* keep Vasilisa safe all this time. That is impressive."

"Well, it's not like I faced down Strigoi or anything," I said.

"But you faced down some things?"

"Sure. The school sent psi-hounds once."

"Remarkable."

"Not really. Avoiding them was pretty easy."

He laughed. "I've hunted with them before. They aren't *that* easy to evade, not with their powers and intelligence." It was true. Psi-hounds were one of many types of magical creatures that wandered the world, creatures that humans never knew about or else didn't believe they'd really seen. The

hounds traveled in packs and shared a sort of psychic communication that made them particularly deadly to their prey—as did the fact that they resembled mutant wolves. “Did you face anything else?”

I shrugged. “Little things here and there.”

“Remarkable,” he repeated.

“Lucky, I think. It turns out I’m really behind in all this guardian stuff.” I sounded just like Stan now.

“You’re a smart girl. You’ll catch up. And you also have your bond.”

I looked away. My ability to “feel” Lissa had been such a secret for so long, it felt weird to have others know about it.

“The histories are full of stories of guardians who could feel when their charges were in danger,” Victor continued. “I’ve made a hobby of studying up on it and some of the ancient ways. I’ve heard it’s a tremendous asset.”

“I guess.” I shrugged. *What a boring hobby,* I thought, imagining him poring over prehistoric histories in some dank library covered in spiderwebs.

Victor tilted his head, curiosity all over his face. Kirova and the others had had the same look when we’d mentioned our connection, like we were lab rats. “What is it like—if you don’t mind me asking?”

“It’s . . . I don’t know. I just sort of always have this hum of how she feels. Usually it’s just emotions. We can’t send messages or anything.” I didn’t tell him about slipping into her head. That part of it was hard even for me to understand.

“But it doesn’t work the other way? She doesn’t sense you?”

I shook my head.

His face shone with wonder. “How did it happen?”

“I don’t know,” I said, still glancing away. “Just started two years ago.”

He frowned. “Near the time of the accident?”

Hesitantly, I nodded. The accident was *not* something I wanted to talk about, that was for sure. Lissa’s memories were bad enough without my own mixing into them. Twisted metal. A sensation of hot, then cold, then hot again. Lissa screaming over me, screaming for me to wake up, screaming for her parents and her brother to wake up. None of them had, only me. And the doctors said that was a miracle in itself. They said I shouldn’t have survived.

Apparently sensing my discomfort, Victor let the moment go and returned to his earlier excitement.

“I can still barely believe this. It’s been so long since this has happened. If it did happen more often . . . just think what it could do for the safety of all Moroi. If only others could experience this too. I’ll have to do more research and see if we can replicate it with others.”

“Yeah.” I was getting impatient, despite how much I liked him. Natalie rambled a lot, and it was pretty clear which parent she’d inherited *that* quality from. Lunch was ticking down, and although Moroi and novices shared afternoon classes, Lissa and I wouldn’t have much time to talk.

“Perhaps we could—” He started coughing, a great, seizing fit that made his whole body shake. His disease, Sandovsky’s Syndrome, took the lungs down with it while dragging the body toward death. I cast an anxious look at his guardians, and one of them stepped forward. “Your Highness,” he said politely, “you need to go inside. It’s too cold out here.”

Victor nodded. “Yes, yes. And I’m sure Rose here wants to eat.” He turned to me. “Thank you for speaking to me. I can’t emphasize how much it means to me that Vasilisa is safe—and that you helped with that. I’d promised her father I’d look after her if anything happened to him, and I felt like quite the failure when you left.”

A sinking sensation filled my stomach as I imagined him wracked with guilt and worry over our disappearance. Until now, I hadn’t really thought about how others might have felt about us leaving.

We made our goodbyes, and I finally arrived inside the school. As I did, I felt Lissa’s anxiety spike. Ignoring the pain in my legs, I picked up my pace into the commons.

And nearly ran right into her.

She didn’t see me, though. Neither did the people standing with her: Aaron and that little doll girl. I stopped and listened, just catching the end of the conversation. The girl leaned toward Lissa, who seemed more stunned than anything else.

“It looks to *me* like it came from a garage sale. I thought a precious Dragomir would have standards.” Scorn dripped off the word *Dragomir*.

Grabbing Doll Girl by the shoulder, I jerked her away. She was so light, she stumbled three feet and nearly fell.

“She does have standards,” I said, “which is why you’re done talking to her.”

FOUR

WE DIDN'T HAVE THE ENTIRE commons' attention this time, thank God, but a few passing people had stopped to stare.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" asked Doll Girl, blue eyes wide and sparkling with fury. Up close now, I was able to get a better look at her. She had the same slim build as most Moroi but not the usual height, which was partly what made her look so young. The tiny purple dress she wore was gorgeous—reminding me that I was indeed dressed in thrift-shop wear—but closer inspection led me to think it was a designer knockoff .

I crossed my arms across my chest. "Are you lost, little girl? The elementary school's over on west campus."

A pink flush spread over her cheeks. "Don't you ever touch me again. You screw with me, and I'll screw you right back."

Oh man, what an opening that was. Only a head shake from Lissa stopped me from unleashing any number of hilarious comebacks. Instead, I opted for simple brute force, so to speak.

"And if you mess with either of us again, I'll break you in half. If you don't believe me, go ask Dawn Yarrow about what I did to her arm in ninth grade. You were probably at nap time when it happened."

The incident with Dawn hadn't been one of my finer moments. I honestly hadn't expected to break any bones when I shoved her into a tree. Still, the incident had given me a dangerous reputation, in addition to my smartass one. The story had gained legendary status, and I liked to imagine that it was still being told around campfires late at night. Judging from the look on this girl's face, it was.

One of the patrolling staff members strolled by right then, casting suspicious eyes at our little meeting. Doll Girl backed off, taking Aaron's arm. "Come on," she said.

"Hey, Aaron," I said cheerfully, remembering he was there. "Nice to see you again."

He gave me a quick nod and an uneasy smile, just as the girl dragged him off. Same old Aaron. He might be nice and cute, but aggressive he was not.

I turned to Lissa. "You okay?" She nodded. "Any idea who I just threatened to beat up?"

"Not a clue." I started to lead her toward the lunch line, but she shook her head at me. "Gotta go see the feeders."

A funny feeling settled over me. I'd gotten so used to being her primary

blood source that the thought of returning to the Moroi's normal routine seemed strange. In fact, it almost bothered me. It shouldn't have. Daily feedings were part of a Moroi's life, something I hadn't been able to offer her while living on our own. It had been an inconvenient situation, one that left me weak on feeding days and her weak on the days in between. I should have been happy she would get some normality.

I forced a smile. "Sure."

We walked into the feeding room, which sat adjacent to the cafeteria. It was set up with small cubicles, dividing the room's space in an effort to offer privacy. A dark-haired Moroi woman greeted us at the entrance and glanced down at her clipboard, flipping through the pages. Finding what she needed, she made a few notes and then gestured for Lissa to follow. Me she gave a puzzled look, but she didn't stop me from entering.

She led us to one of the cubicles where a plump, middle-aged woman sat leafing through a magazine. She looked up at our approach and smiled. In her eyes, I could see the dreamy, glazed-over look most feeders had. She'd probably neared her quota for the day, judging from how high she appeared to be.

Recognizing Lissa, her smile grew. "Welcome back, Princess."

The greeter left us, and Lissa sat down in the chair beside the woman. I sensed a feeling of discomfort in her, a little different from my own. This was weird for her too; it had been a long time. The feeder, however, had no such reservations. An eager look crossed her face—the look of a junkie about to get her next fix.

Disgust poured into me. It was an old instinct, one that had been drilled in over the years. Feeders were essential to Moroi life. They were humans who willingly volunteered to be a regular blood source, humans from the fringes of society who gave their lives over to the secret world of the Moroi. They were well cared for and given all the comforts they could need. But at the heart of it, they were drug users, addicts to Moroi saliva and the rush it offered with each bite. The Moroi—and guardians—looked down on this dependency, even though the Moroi couldn't have survived otherwise unless they took victims by force. Hypocrisy at its finest.

The feeder tilted her head, giving Lissa full access to her neck. Her skin there was marked with scars from years of daily bites. The infrequent feedings Lissa and I had done had kept my neck clear; my bite marks never lasted more than a day or so.

Lissa leaned forward, fangs biting into the feeder's yielding flesh. The woman closed her eyes, making a soft sound of pleasure. I swallowed, watching Lissa drink. I couldn't see any blood, but I could imagine it. A surge of emotion grew in my chest: longing. Jealousy. I averted my eyes, staring at the floor. Mentally, I scolded myself.

What's wrong with you? Why should you miss it? You only did it once every day. You aren't addicted, not like this. And you don't want to be.

But I couldn't help myself, couldn't help the way I felt as I recalled the bliss and rush of a vampire's bite.

Lissa finished and we returned to the commons, moving toward the lunch line. It was short, since we only had fifteen minutes left, and I strolled up and

began to load my plate with french fries and some rounded, bite-size objects that looked vaguely like chicken nuggets. Lissa only grabbed a yogurt. Moroi needed food, as dhampirs and humans did, but rarely had an appetite after drinking blood.

"So how'd classes go?" I asked.

She shrugged. Her face was bright with color and life now. "Okay. Lots of stares. A *lot* of stares. Lots of questions about where we were. Whispering."

"Same here," I said. The attendant checked us out, and we walked toward the tables. I gave Lissa a sidelong glance. "You okay with that? They aren't bothering you, are they?"

"No—it's fine." The emotions coming through the bond contradicted her words. Knowing I could feel that, she tried to change the subject by handing me her class schedule. I looked it over.

1st Period Russian 2
2nd Period American Colonial Literature
3rd Period Basics of Elemental Control
4th Period Ancient Poetry

—Lunch—

5th Period Animal Behavior and Physiology
6th Period Advanced Calculus
7th Period Moroi Culture 4
8th Period Slavic Art

"Nerd," I said. "If you were in Stupid Math like me, we'd have the same afternoon schedule." I stopped walking. "Why are you in elemental basics? That's a sophomore class."

She eyed me. "Because seniors take specialized classes."

We fell silent at that. All Moroi wielded elemental magic. It was one of the things that differentiated living vampires from Strigoi, the dead vampires. Moroi viewed magic as a gift. It was part of their souls and connected them to the world.

A long time ago, they had used their magic openly, averting natural disasters and helping with things like food and water production. They didn't need to do that as much anymore, but the magic was still in their blood. It burned in them and made them want to reach out to the earth and wield their power. Academies like this existed to help Moroi control the magic and learn how to do increasingly complex things with it. Students also had to learn the rules that surrounded magic, rules that had been in place for centuries and were strictly enforced.

All Moroi had a small ability in each element. When they got to be around our age, students "specialized" when one element grew stronger than the others: earth, water, fire, or air. Not specializing was like not going through puberty.

And Lissa . . . well, Lissa hadn't specialized yet.

"Is Ms. Carmack still teaching that? What she'd say?"

"She says she's not worried. She thinks it'll come."

"Did you—did you tell her about—"

Lissa shook her head. "No. Of course not."

We let the subject drop. It was one we thought about a lot but rarely spoke of.

We started moving again, scanning the tables as we decided where to sit. A few pairs of eyes looked up at us with blatant curiosity.

"Lissa!" came a nearby voice. Glancing over, we saw Natalie waving at us. Lissa and I exchanged looks. Natalie was sort of Lissa's cousin in the way Victor was sort of her uncle, but we'd never hung out with her all that much.

Lissa shrugged and headed in that direction. "Why not?"

I followed reluctantly. Natalie was nice but also one of the most uninteresting people I knew. Most royals at the school enjoyed a kind of celebrity status, but Natalie had never fit in with that crowd. She was too plain, too uninterested in the politics of the Academy, and too clueless to really navigate them anyway.

Natalie's friends eyed us with a quiet curiosity, but she didn't hold back. She threw her arms around us. Like Lissa, she had jade-green eyes, but her hair was jet black, like Victor's had been before his disease grayed it.

"You're back! I knew you would be! Everyone said you were gone forever, but I never believed that. I knew you couldn't stay away. Why'd you go? There are so many stories about why you left!" Lissa and I exchanged glances as Natalie prattled on. "Camille said one of you got pregnant and went off to have an abortion, but I knew that couldn't be true. Someone else said you went off to hang out with Rose's mom, but I figured Ms. Kirova and Daddy wouldn't have been so upset if you'd turned up there. Did you know we might get to be roommates? I was talking to . . ."

On and on she chatted, flashing her fangs as she spoke. I smiled politely, letting Lissa deal with the onslaught until Natalie asked a dangerous question.

"What'd you do for blood, Lissa?"

The table regarded us questioningly. Lissa froze, but I immediately jumped in, the lie coming effortlessly to my lips.

"Oh, it's easy. There are a lot of humans who want to do it."

"Really?" asked one of Natalie's friends, wide-eyed.

"Yup. You find 'em at parties and stuff. They're all looking for a fix from something, and they don't really get that a vampire's doing it: most are already so wasted they don't remember anyway." My already vague details dried up, so I simply shrugged in as cool and confident a way as I could manage. It wasn't like any of them knew any better. "Like I said, it's easy. Almost easier than with our own feeders."

Natalie accepted this and then launched into some other topic. Lissa shot me a grateful look.

Ignoring the conversation again, I took in the old faces, trying to figure out who was hanging out with whom and how power had shifted within the school. Mason, sitting with a group of novices, caught my eye, and I smiled. Near him, a group of Moroi royals sat, laughing over something. Aaron and the blond girl sat there too.

"Hey, Natalie," I said, turning around and cutting her off. She didn't seem to notice or mind. "Who's Aaron's new girlfriend?"

"Huh? Oh. Mia Rinaldi." Seeing my blank look, she asked, "Don't you remember her?"

"Should I? Was she here when we left?"

"She's always been here," said Natalie. "She's only a year younger than us."

I shot a questioning look at Lissa, who only shrugged.

"Why is she so pissed off at us?" I asked. "Neither of us know her."

"I don't know," answered Natalie. "Maybe she's jealous about Aaron. She wasn't much of anybody when you guys left. She got *really* popular *really* fast. She isn't royal or anything, but once she started dating Aaron, she—"

"Okay, thanks," I interrupted. "It doesn't really—"

My eyes lifted up from Natalie's face to Jesse Zeklos's, just as he passed by our table. Ah, Jesse. I'd forgotten about him. I liked flirting with Mason and some of the other novices, but Jesse was in an entirely different category. You flirted with the other guys simply for the sake of flirting. You flirted with Jesse in the hopes of getting semi-naked with him. He was a royal Moroi, and he was so hot, he should have worn a WARNING: FLAMMABLE sign. He met my eyes and grinned.

"Hey Rose, welcome back. You still breaking hearts?"

"Are you volunteering?"

His grin widened. "Let's hang out sometime and find out. If you ever get parole."

He kept walking, and I watched him admiringly. Natalie and her friends stared at me in awe. I might not be a god in the Dimitri sense, but with this group, Lissa and I *were* gods—or at least former gods—of another nature.

"Oh my gawd," exclaimed one girl. I didn't remember her name. "That was *Jesse*."

"Yes," I said, smiling. "It certainly was."

"I wish I looked like you," she added with a sigh.

Their eyes fell on me. Technically, I was half-Moroi, but my looks were human. I'd blended in well with humans during our time away, so much so that I'd barely thought about my appearance at all. Here, among the slim and small-chested Moroi girls, certain features—meaning my larger breasts and more defined hips—stood out. I knew I was pretty, but to Moroi boys, my body was more than just pretty: it was sexy in a risqué way. Dhampirs were an exotic conquest, a novelty all Moroi guys wanted to "try."

It was ironic that dhampirs had such an allure here, because slender Moroi girls looked very much like the super-skinny runway models so popular in the human world. Most humans could never reach that "ideal" skinniness, just as Moroi girls could never look like me. Everyone wanted what she couldn't have.

Lissa and I got to sit together in our shared afternoon classes but didn't do much talking. The stares she'd mentioned certainly did follow us, but I found that the more I talked to people, the more they warmed up. Slowly, gradually, they seemed to remember who we were, and the novelty—though not the intrigue—of our crazy stunt wore off.

Or maybe I should say, they remembered who *I* was. Because I was the only one talking. Lissa stared straight ahead, listening but neither acknowledging nor participating in my attempts at conversation. I could feel anxiety and sadness pouring out of her.

"All right," I told her when classes finally ended. We stood outside the

school, and I was fully aware that in doing so, I was already breaking the terms of my agreement with Kirova. “We’re not staying here,” I told her, looking around the campus uneasily. I’m going to find a way to get us out.”

“You think we could really do it a second time?” Lissa asked quietly.

“Absolutely.” I spoke with certainty, again relieved she couldn’t read my feelings. Escaping the first time had been tricky enough. Doing it again would be a real bitch, not that I couldn’t still find a way.

“You really would, wouldn’t you?” She smiled, more to herself than to me, like she’d thought of something funny. “Of course you would. It’s just, well . . .” She sighed. “I don’t know if we should go. Maybe—maybe we should stay.”

I blinked in astonishment. “What?” Not one of my more eloquent answers, but the best I could manage. I’d never expected this from her.

“I saw you, Rose. I saw you talking to the other novices during class, talking about practice. You miss that.”

“It’s not worth it,” I argued. “Not if . . . not if *you* . . .” I couldn’t finish, but she was right. She’d read me. I *had* missed the other novices. Even some of the Moroi. But there was more to it than just that. The weight of my inexperience, how much I’d fallen behind, had been growing all day.

“It might be better,” she countered. “I haven’t had as many . . . you know, things happening in a while. I haven’t felt like anyone was following or watching us.”

I didn’t say anything to that. Before we’d left the Academy, she’d always felt like someone was following her, like she was being hunted. I’d never seen evidence to support that, but I had once heard one of our teachers go on and on about the same sort of thing. Ms. Karp. She’d been a pretty Moroi, with deep auburn air and high cheekbones. And I was pretty sure she’d been crazy.

“You never know who’s watching,” she used to say, walking briskly around the classroom as she shut all the blinds. “Or who’s following you. Best to be safe. Best to *always* be safe.” We’d snickered amongst ourselves because that’s what students do around eccentric and paranoid teachers. The thought of Lissa acting like her bothered me.

“What’s wrong?” Lissa asked, noticing that I was lost in thought.

“Huh? Nothing. Just thinking.” I sighed, trying to balance my own wants with what was best for her. “Liss, we can stay, I guess . . . but there are a few conditions.”

This made her laugh. “A Rose ultimatum, huh?”

“I’m serious.” Words I didn’t say very much. “I want you to stay away from the royals. Not like Natalie or anything, but you know, the others. The power players. Camille. Carly. That group.”

Her amusement turned to astonishment. “Are you serious?”

“Sure. You never liked them anyway.”

“*You* did.”

“No. Not really. I liked what they could offer. All the parties and stuff.”

“And you can go without that now?” She looked skeptical.

“Sure. We did in Portland.”

“Yeah, but that was different.” Her eyes stared off, not really focused on any one thing. “Here . . . *here* I’ve got to be a part of that. I can’t avoid it.”

“The hell you do. Natalie stays out of that stuff.”

"Natalie isn't going to inherit her family's title," she retorted. "I've already got it. I've got to be involved, start making connections. Andre—"

"Liss," I groaned. "You *aren't* Andre." I couldn't believe she was still comparing herself to her brother.

"He was always involved in all that stuff."

"Yeah, well," I snapped back, "he's *dead* now."

Her face hardened. "You know, sometimes you aren't very nice."

"You don't keep me around to be nice. You want nice, there are a dozen sheep in there who would rip each other's throats to get in good with the Dragomir princess. You keep me around to tell you the truth, and here it is: Andre's dead. You're the heir now, and you're going to deal with it however you can. But for now, that means staying away from the other royals. We'll just lie low. Coast through the middle. Get involved in that stuff again, Liss, and you'll drive yourself . . ."

"*Crazy*?" she supplied when I didn't finish.

Now I looked away. "I didn't mean . . ."

"It's okay," she said, after a moment. She sighed and touched my arm. "Fine. We'll stay, and we'll keep out of all that stuff. We'll 'coast through the middle' like you want. Hang out with Natalie, I guess."

To be perfectly honest, I didn't want any of that. I wanted to go to all the royal parties and wild drunken festivities like we'd done before. We'd kept out of that life for years until Lissa's parents and brother died. Andre should have been the one to inherit her family's title, and he'd certainly acted like it. Handsome and outgoing, he'd charmed everyone he knew and had been a leader in all the royal cliques and clubs that existed on campus. After his death, Lissa had felt it was her family duty to take his place.

I'd gotten to join that world with her. It was easy for me, because I didn't really have to deal with the politics of it. I was a pretty dhampir, one who didn't mind getting into trouble and pulling crazy stunts. I became a novelty; they liked having me around for the fun of it.

Lissa had to deal with other matters. The Dragomirs were one of the twelve ruling families. She'd have a very powerful place in Moroi society, and the other young royals wanted to get in good with her. Fake friends tried to schmooze her and get her to team up against other people. The royals could bribe and backstab in the same breath—and that was just with *each other*. To dhampirs and non-royals, they were completely unpredictable.

That cruel culture had eventually taken its toll on Lissa. She had an open, kind nature, one that I loved, and I hated to see her upset and stressed by royal games. She'd grown fragile since the accident, and all the parties in the world weren't worth seeing her hurt.

"All right then," I said finally. "We'll see how this goes. If anything goes wrong—anything at all—we leave. No arguments."

She nodded.

"Rose?"

We both looked up at Dimitri's looming form. I hoped he hadn't heard the part about us leaving.

"You're late for practice," he said evenly. Seeing Lissa, he gave a polite nod. "Princess."

As he and I walked away, I worried about Lissa and wondered if staying here was the right thing to do. I felt nothing alarming through the bond, but her emotions spiked all over the place. Confusion. Nostalgia. Fear. Anticipation. Strong and powerful, they flooded into me.

I felt the pull just before it happened. It was exactly like what had happened on the plane: her emotions grew so strong that they "sucked" me into her head before I could stop them. I could now see and feel what she did.

She walked slowly around the commons, toward the small Russian Orthodox chapel that served most of the school's religious needs. Lissa had always attended mass regularly. Not me. I had a standing arrangement with God: I'd agree to believe in him—barely—so long as he let me sleep in on Sundays.

But as she went inside, I could feel that she wasn't there to pray. She had another purpose, one I didn't know about. Glancing around, she verified that neither the priest nor any worshippers were close by. The place was empty.

Slipping through a doorway in the back of the chapel, she climbed a narrow set of creaky stairs up into the attic. Here it was dark and dusty. The only light came through a large stained-glass window that fractured the faint glow of sunrise into tiny, multicolored gems across the floor.

I hadn't known until that moment that this room was a regular retreat for Lissa. But now I could feel it, feel her memories of how she used to escape here to be alone and to think. The anxiety in her ebbed away ever so slightly as she took in the familiar surroundings. She climbed up into the window seat and leaned her head back against its side, momentarily entranced by the silence and the light.

Moroi could stand some sunlight, unlike the Strigoi, but they had to limit their exposure. Sitting here, she could almost pretend she was in the sun, protected by the glass's dilution of the rays.

Breathe, just breathe, she told herself. *It'll be okay. Rose will take care of everything.*

She believed that passionately, like always, and relaxed further.

Then a low voice spoke from the darkness.

"You can have the Academy but not the window seat."

She sprang up, heart pounding. I shared her anxiety, and my own pulse quickened. "Who's there?"

A moment later, a shape rose from behind a stack of crates, just outside her field of vision. The figure stepped forward, and in the poor lighting, familiar features materialized. Messy black hair. Pale blue eyes. A perpetually sardonic smirk.

Christian Ozera.

"Don't worry," he said. "I won't bite. Well, at least not in the way you're afraid of." He chuckled at his own joke.

She didn't find it funny. She had completely forgotten about Christian. So had I.

No matter what happened in our world, a few basic truths about vampires remained the same. Moroi were alive; Strigoi were undead. Moroi were mortal; Strigoi were immortal. Moroi were born; Strigoi were *made*.

And there were two ways to make a Strigoi. Strigoi could forcibly turn

humans, dhampirs, or Moroi with a single bite. Moroi tempted by the promise of immortality could become Strigoi by choice if they purposely killed another person while feeding. Doing that was considered dark and twisted, the greatest of all sins, both against the Moroi way of life and nature itself. Moroi who chose this dark path lost their ability to connect with elemental magic and other powers of the world. That was why they could no longer go into the sun.

This is what had happened to Christian's parents. They were Strigoi.

FIVE

OR RATHER, THEY HAD BEEN Strigoi. A regiment of guardians had hunted them down and killed them. If rumors were true, Christian had witnessed it all when he was very young. And although he wasn't Strigoi himself, some people thought he wasn't far off, with the way he always wore black and kept to himself.

Strigoi or not, I didn't trust him. He was a jerk, and I silently screamed at Lissa to get out of there—not that my screaming did much good. Stupid one-way bond.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"Taking in the sights, of course. That chair with the tarp on it is particularly lovely this time of year. Over there, we have an old box full of the writings of the blessed and crazy St. Vladimir. And let's not forget that beautiful table with no legs in the corner."

"Whatever." She rolled her eyes and moved toward the door, wanting to leave, but he blocked her way.

"Well, what about *you*?" he taunted. "Why are you up here? Don't you have parties to go to or lives to destroy?"

Some of Lissa's old spark returned. "Wow, that's hilarious. Am I like a rite of passage now? Go and see if you can piss off Lissa to prove how cool you are? Some girl I don't even know yelled at me today, and now I've got to deal with you? What does it take to be left alone?"

"Oh. So that's why you're up here. For a pity party."

"This isn't a joke. I'm serious." I could tell Lissa was getting angry. It was trumping her earlier distress.

He shrugged and leaned casually against the sloping wall. "So am I. I love pity parties. I wish I'd brought the hats. What do you want to mope about first? How it's going to take you a whole day to be popular and loved again? How you'll have to wait a couple weeks before Hollister can ship out some new clothes? If you spring for rush shipping, it might not be so long."

"Let me leave," she said angrily, this time pushing him aside.

"Wait," he said, as she reached the door. The sarcasm disappeared from his voice. "What . . . um, what was it like?"

"What was *what* like?" she snapped.

"Being out there. Away from the Academy."

She hesitated for a moment before answering, caught off guard by what seemed like a genuine attempt at conversation. "It was great. No one knew

who I was. I was just another face. Not Moroi. Not royal. Not anything." She looked down at the floor. "Everyone here thinks they know who I am."

"Yeah. It's kind of hard to outlive your past," he said bitterly.

It occurred to Lissa at that moment—and me to by default—just how hard it might be to be Christian. Most of the time, people treated him like he didn't exist. Like he was a ghost. They didn't talk to or about him. They just didn't notice him. The stigma of his parents' crime was too strong, casting its shadow onto the entire Ozera family.

Still, he'd pissed her off, and she wasn't about to feel sorry for him.

"Wait—is this your pity party now?"

He laughed, almost approvingly. "This room has been my pity party for a year now."

"Sorry," said Lissa snarkily. "I was coming here before I left. I've got a longer claim."

"Squatters' rights. Besides, I have to make sure I stay near the chapel as much as possible so people know I haven't gone Strigoi . . . yet." Again, the bitter tone rang out.

"I used to always see you at mass. Is that the only reason you go? To look good?" Strigoi couldn't enter holy ground. More of that sinning-against-the-world thing.

"Sure," he said. "Why else go? For the good of your *soul*?"

"Whatever," said Lissa, who clearly had a different opinion. "I'll leave you alone then."

"Wait," he said again. He didn't seem to want her to go. "I'll make you a deal. You can hang out here too if you tell me one thing."

"What?" She glanced back at him.

He leaned forward. "Of all the rumors I heard about you today—and believe me, I heard plenty, even if no one actually told them to me—there was one that didn't come up very much. They dissected everything else: why you left, what you did out there, why you came back, the specialization, what Rose said to Mia, blah, blah, blah. And in all of that, no one, no one ever questioned that stupid story that Rose told about there being all sorts of fringe humans who let you take blood."

She looked away, and I could feel her cheeks starting to burn. "It's not stupid. Or a story."

He laughed softly. "I've lived with humans. My aunt and I stayed away after my parents . . . died. It's not that easy to find blood." When she didn't answer, he laughed again. "It was Rose, wasn't it? She fed you."

A renewed fear shot through both her and me. No one at school could know about that. Kirova and the guardians on the scene knew, but they'd kept that knowledge to themselves.

"Well. If that's not friendship, I don't know what it is," he said.

"You can't tell anyone," she blurted out.

This was all we needed. As I'd just been reminded, feeders were vampire-bite addicts. We accepted that as part of life but still looked down on them for it. For anyone else—*especially* a dhampir—letting a Moroi take blood from you was almost, well, dirty. In fact, one of the kinkiest, practically pornographic things a dhampir could do was let a Moroi drink blood during sex.

Lissa and I hadn't had sex, of course, but we'd both known what others would think of me feeding her.

"Don't tell anyone," Lissa repeated.

He stuffed his hands in his coat pockets and sat down on one of the crates. "Who am I going to tell? Look, go grab the window seat. You can have it today and hang out for a while. If you're not still afraid of me."

She hesitated, studying him. He looked dark and surly, lips curled in a sort of I'm-such-a-rebel smirk. But he didn't look too dangerous. He didn't look Strigoi. Gingerly, she sat back down in the window seat, unconsciously rubbing her arms against the cold.

Christian watched her, and a moment later, the air warmed up considerably.

Lissa met Christian's eyes and smiled, surprised she'd never noticed how icy blue they were before. "You specialized in fire?"

He nodded and pulled up a broken chair. "Now we have luxury accommodations."

I snapped out of the vision.

"Rose? Rose?"

Blinking, I focused on Dimitri's face. He was leaning toward me, his hands gripping my shoulders. I'd stopped walking; we stood in the middle of the quad separating the upper school buildings.

"Are you all right?"

"I . . . yeah. I was . . . I was with Lissa. . . ." I put a hand to my forehead. I'd never had such a long or clear experience like that. "I was in her head."

"Her . . . head?"

"Yeah. It's part of the bond." I didn't really feel like elaborating.

"Is she all right?"

"Yeah, she's . . ." I hesitated. *Was* she all right? Christian Ozera had just invited her to hang out with him. Not good. There was "coasting through the middle," and then there was turning to the dark side. But the feelings humming through our bond were no longer scared or upset. She was almost content, though still a little nervous. "She's not in danger," I finally said. I hoped.

"Can you keep going?"

The hard, stoic warrior I'd met earlier was gone—just for a moment—and he actually looked concerned. Truly concerned. Feeling his eyes on me like that made something flutter inside of me—which was stupid, of course. I had no reason to get all goofy, just because the man was too good-looking for his own good. After all, he was an antisocial god, according to Mason. One who was supposedly going to leave me in all sorts of pain.

"Yeah. I'm fine."

I went into the gym's dressing room and changed into the workout clothes someone had finally thought to give me after a day of practicing in jeans and a T-shirt. Gross. Lissa hanging out with Christian troubled me, but I shoved that thought away for later as my muscles informed me they did not want to go through any more exercise today.

So I suggested to Dimitri that maybe he should let me off this time.

He laughed, and I was pretty sure it was *at* me and not *with* me.

"Why is that funny?"

"Oh," he said, his smile dropping. "You were serious."

"Of course I was! Look, I've technically been awake for *two* days. Why do we have to start this training now? Let me go to bed," I whined. "It's just one hour."

He crossed his arms and looked down at me. His earlier concern was gone. He was all business now. Tough love. "How do you feel right now? After the training you've done so far?"

"I hurt like hell."

"You'll feel worse tomorrow."

"So?"

"So, better to jump in now while you still feel . . . not as bad."

"What kind of logic is that?" I retorted.

But I didn't argue anymore as he led me into the weight room. He showed me the weights and reps he wanted me to do, then sprawled in a corner with a battered Western novel. Some god.

When I finished, he stood beside me and demonstrated a few cool-down stretches.

"How'd you end up as Lissa's guardian?" I asked. "You weren't here a few years ago. Were you even trained at this school?"

He didn't answer right away. I got the feeling he didn't talk about himself very often. "No. I attended the one in Siberia."

"Whoa. That's got to be the only place worse than Montana."

A glint of something—maybe amusement—sparked in his eyes, but he didn't acknowledge the joke. "After I graduated, I was a guardian for a Zeklos lord. He was killed recently." His smile dropped, his face grew dark. "They sent me here because they needed extras on campus. When the princess turned up, they assigned me to her, since I'd already be around. Not that it matters until she leaves campus."

I thought about what he'd said before. Some Strigoi killed the guy he was supposed to have been guarding? "Did this lord die on your watch?"

"No. He was with his other guardian. I was away."

He fell silent, his mind obviously somewhere else. The Moroi expected a lot from us, but they did recognize that the guardians were—more or less—only human. So, guardians got pay and time off like you'd get in any other job. Some hard-core guardians—like my mom—refused vacations, vowing never to leave their Moroi's sides. Looking at Dimitri now, I had a feeling he might very well turn into one of those. If he'd been away on legitimate leave, he could hardly blame himself for what happened to that guy. Still, he probably did anyway. I'd blame myself too if something happened to Lissa.

"Hey," I said, suddenly wanting to cheer him up, "did you help come up with the plan to get us back? Because it was pretty good. Brute force and all that."

He arched an eyebrow curiously. Cool. I'd always wished I could do that. "You're complimenting me on that?"

"Well, it was a hell of a lot better than the last one they tried."

"Last one?"

"Yeah. In Chicago. With the pack of psi-hounds."

"This was the first time we found you. In Portland."

I sat up from my stretches and crossed my legs. “Um, I don’t think I imagined psi-hounds. Who else could have sent them? They only answer to Moroi. Maybe no one told you about it.”

“Maybe,” he said dismissively. I could tell by his face he didn’t believe that.

I returned to the novices’ dorm after that. The Moroi students lived on the other side of the quad, closer to the commons. The living arrangements were partly based on convenience. Being here kept us novices closer to the gym and training grounds. But we also lived separately to accommodate the differences in Moroi and dhampir lifestyles. Their dorm had almost no windows, aside from tinted ones that dimmed sunlight. They also had a special section where feeders always stayed on hand. The novices’ dorm was built in a more open way, allowing for more light.

I had my own room because there were so few novices, let alone girls. The room they’d given me was small and plain, with a twin bed and a desk with a computer. My few belongings had been spirited out of Portland and now sat in boxes around the room. I rummaged through them, pulling out a T-shirt to sleep in. I found a couple of pictures as I did, one of Lissa and me at a football game in Portland and another taken when I’d gone on vacation with her family, a year before the accident.

I set them on my desk and booted up the computer. Someone from tech support had helpfully given me a sheet with instructions for renewing my e-mail account and setting up a password. I did both, happy to discover no one had realized that this would serve as a way for me to communicate with Lissa. Too tired to write to her now, I was about to turn everything off when I noticed I already had a message. From Janine Hathaway. It was short:

I’m glad you’re back. What you did was inexcusable.

“Love you too, Mom,” I muttered, shutting it all down.

When I went to bed afterward, I passed out before even hitting the pillow, and just as Dimitri had predicted, I felt ten times worse when I woke up the next morning. Lying there in bed, I reconsidered the perks of running away. Then I remembered getting my ass kicked and figured the only way to prevent that from happening again was to go endure some more of it this morning.

My soreness made it all that much worse, but I survived the before-school practice with Dimitri and my subsequent classes without passing out or fainting.

At lunch, I dragged Lissa away from Natalie’s table early and gave her a Kirova-worthy lecture about Christian—particularly chastising her for letting him know about our blood arrangement. If that got out, it’d kill both of us socially, and I didn’t trust him not to tell.

Lissa had other concerns.

“You were in my head again?” she exclaimed. “For *that* long?”

“I didn’t do it on purpose,” I argued. “It just happened. And that’s not the point. How long did you hang out with him afterward?”

“Not that long. It was kind of . . . fun.”

“Well, you can’t do it again. If people find out you’re hanging out with him, they’ll crucify you.” I eyed her warily. “You aren’t, like, into him, are you?”

She scoffed. “No. Of course not.

“Good. Because if you’re going to go after a guy, steal Aaron back.” He was

boring, yes, but safe. Just like Natalie. How come all the harmless people were so lame? Maybe that was the definition of safe.

She laughed. “Mia would claw my eyes out.”

“We can take her. Besides, he deserves someone who doesn’t shop at Gap Kids.”

“Rose, you’ve got to stop saying things like that.”

“I’m just saying what you won’t.”

“She’s only a year younger,” said Lissa. She laughed. “I can’t believe you think *I’m* the one who’s going to get us in trouble.”

Smiling as we strolled toward class, I gave her a sidelong glance. “Aaron does look pretty good though, huh?”

She smiled back and avoided my eyes. “Yeah. Pretty good.”

“Ooh. You see? You should go after him.”

“Whatever. I’m fine being friends now.”

“Friends who used to stick their tongues down each other’s throats.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Fine.” I let my teasing go. “Let Aaron stay in the nursery school. Just so long as you stay away from Christian. He’s dangerous.”

“You’re overreacting. He’s not going Strigoi.”

“He’s a bad influence.”

She laughed. “You think *I’m* in danger of going Strigoi?”

She didn’t wait for my answer, instead pushing ahead to open the door to our science class. Standing there, I uneasily replayed her words and then followed a moment later. When I did, I got to see royal power in action. A few guys—with giggling, watching girls—were messing with a gangly-looking Moroi. I didn’t know him very well, but I knew he was poor and certainly not royal. A couple of his tormentors were air-magic users, and they’d blown the papers off his desk and were pushing them around the room on currents of air while the guy tried to catch them.

My instincts urged me to do something, maybe go smack one of the air users. But I couldn’t pick a fight with everyone who annoyed me, and certainly not a group of royals—especially when Lissa needed to stay off their radar. So I could only give them a look of disgust as I walked to my desk. As I did, a hand caught my arm. Jesse.

“Hey,” I said jokingly. Fortunately, he didn’t appear to be participating in the torture session. “Hands off the merchandise.”

He flashed me a smile but kept his hand on me. “Rose, tell Paul about the time you started the fight in Ms. Karp’s class.”

I cocked my head toward him, giving him a playful smile. “I started a lot of fights in her class.”

“The one with the hermit crab. And the gerbil.”

I laughed, recalling it. “Oh yeah. It was a hamster, I think. I just dropped it into the crab’s tank, and they were both worked up from being so close to me, so they went at it.”

Paul, a guy sitting nearby whom I didn’t really know, chuckled too. He’d transferred last year, apparently, and hadn’t heard of this. “Who won?”

I looked at Jesse quizzically. “I don’t remember. Do you?”

“No. I just remember Karp freaking out.” He turned toward Paul. “Man, you

should have seen this messed-up teacher we used to have. Used to think people were after her and would go off on stuff that didn't make any sense. She was nuts. Used to wander campus while everyone was asleep."

I smiled tightly, like I thought it was funny. Instead, I thought back to Ms. Karp again, surprised to be thinking about her for the second time in two days. Jesse was right— she *had* wandered campus a lot when she still worked here. It was pretty creepy. I'd run into her once—unexpectedly.

I'd been climbing out of my dorm window to go hang out with some people. It was after hours, and we were all supposed to be in our rooms, fast asleep. Such escape tactics were a regular practice for me. I was good at them.

But I fell that time. I had a second-floor room, and I lost my grip about halfway down. Sensing the ground rush up toward me, I tried desperately to grab hold of something and slow my fall. The building's rough stone tore into my skin, causing cuts I was too preoccupied to feel. I slammed into the grassy earth, back first, getting the wind knocked out of me.

"Bad form, Rosemarie. You should be more careful. Your instructors would be disappointed."

Peering through the tangle of my hair, I saw Ms. Karp looking down at me, a bemused look on her face. Pain, in the meantime, shot through every part of my body.

Ignoring it as best I could, I clambered to my feet. Being in class with Crazy Karp while surrounded by other students was one thing. Standing outside alone with her was an entirely different matter. She always had an eerie, distracted gleam in her eye that made my skin break out in goose bumps.

There was also now a high likelihood she'd drag me off to Kirova for a detention. Scarier still.

Instead, she just smiled and reached for my hands. I flinched but let her take them. She *tsk*ed when she saw the scrapes. Tightening her grip on them, she frowned slightly. A tingle burned my skin, laced with a sort of pleasant buzz, and then the wounds closed up. I had a brief sense of dizziness. My temperature spiked. The blood disappeared, as did the pain in my hip and leg.

Gasping, I jerked my hands away. I'd seen a lot of Moroi magic, but never anything like that.

"What . . . what did you do?"

She gave me that weird smile again. "Go back to your dorm, Rose. There are bad things out here. You never know what's following you."

I was still staring at my hands. "But . . ."

I looked back up at her and for the first time noticed scars on the sides of her forehead. Like nails had dug into them. She winked. "I won't tell on you if you don't tell on me."

I jumped back to the present, unsettled by the memory of that bizarre night. Jesse, in the meantime, was telling me about a party.

"You've got to slip your leash tonight. We're going up to that spot in the woods around eight thirty. Mark got some weed."

I sighed wistfully, regret replacing the chill I'd felt over the memory of Ms. Karp. "Can't slip that leash. I'm with my Russian jailer."

He let go of my arm, looking disappointed, and ran a hand through his bronze-colored hair. Yeah. Not being able to hang out with him was a damned

shame. I really would have to fix that someday. “Can’t you ever get off for good behavior?” he joked.

I gave him what I hoped was a seductive smile as I found my seat. “Sure,” I called over my shoulder. “If I was ever good.”

SIX

AS MUCH AS LISSA AND Christian's meeting bothered me, it gave me an idea the next day.

"Hey, Kirova—er, Ms. Kirova." I stood in the doorway of her office, not having bothered to make an appointment. She raised her eyes from some paperwork, clearly annoyed to see me.

"Yes, Miss Hathaway?"

"Does my house arrest mean I can't go to church?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"You said that whenever I'm not in class or practice, I have to stay in the dorm. But what about church on Sundays? I don't think it's really fair to keep me away from my religious . . . um, needs." Or deprive me of another chance —no matter how short and boring—to hang out with Lissa.

She pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose. "I wasn't aware you had any religious needs."

"I found Jesus while I was gone."

"Isn't your mother an atheist?" she asked skeptically.

"And my dad's probably Muslim. But I've moved on to my own path. You shouldn't keep me from it."

She made a noise that sort of sounded like a snicker. "No, Miss Hathaway, I should not. Very well. You may attend services on Sundays."

The victory was short-lived, however, because church was every bit as lame as I remembered when I attended a few days later. I did get to sit next to Lissa, though, which made me feel like I was getting away with something. Mostly I just people-watched. Church was optional for students, but with so many Eastern European families, a lot of students were Eastern Orthodox Christians and attended either because they believed or because their parents made them.

Christian sat on the opposite side of the aisle, pretending to be just as holy as he'd said. As much as I didn't like him, his fake faith still made me smile. Dimitri sat in the back, face lined with shadows, and, like me, didn't take communion. As thoughtful as he looked, I wondered if he even listened to the service. I tuned in and out.

"Following God's path is never easy," the priest was saying. "Even St. Vladimir, this school's own patron saint, had a difficult time. He was so filled with spirit that people often flocked around him, enthralled just to listen and be in his presence. So great was his spirit, the old texts say, that he could heal

the sick. Yet despite these gifts, many did not respect him. They mocked him, claiming he was misguided and confused."

Which was a nice way of saying Vladimir was insane. Everyone knew it. He was one of a handful of Moroi saints, so the priest liked to talk about him a lot. I'd heard all about him, many times over, before we left. Great. It looked like I had an eternity of Sundays to hear his story over and over again.

". . . and so it was with shadow-kissed Anna."

I jerked my head up. I had no idea what the priest was talking about now, because I hadn't been listening for some time. But those words burned into me. *Shadow-kissed*. It had been a while since I heard them, but I'd never forgotten them. I waited, hoping he'd continue, but he'd already moved on to the next part of the service. The sermon was over.

Church concluded, and as Lissa turned to go, I shook my head at her. "Wait for me. I'll be right there."

I pushed my way through the crowd, up to the front, where the priest was speaking with a few people. I waited impatiently while he finished. Natalie was there, asking him about volunteer work she could do. Ugh. When she finished, she left, greeting me as she passed.

The priest raised his eyebrows when he saw me. "Hello, Rose. It's nice to see you again."

"Yeah . . . you too," I said. "I heard you talking about Anna. About how she was 'shadow-kissed.' What does that mean?"

He frowned. "I'm not entirely sure. She lived a very long time ago. It was often common to refer to people by titles that reflected some of their traits. It might have been given to make her sound fierce."

I tried to hide my disappointment. "Oh. So who was she?"

This time his frown was disapproving rather than thoughtful. "I mentioned it a number of times."

"Oh. I must have, um, missed that."

His disapproval grew, and he turned around. "Wait just a moment."

He disappeared through the door near the altar, the one Lissa had taken to the attic. I considered fleeing but thought God might strike me down for that. Less than a minute later, the priest returned with a book. He handed it to me. *Moroi Saints*.

"You can learn about her in here. The next time I see you, I'd like to hear what you've learned."

I scowled as I walked away. Great. Homework from the priest.

In the chapel's entryway, I found Lissa talking to Aaron. She smiled as she spoke, and the feelings coming off her were happy, though certainly not infatuated.

"You're kidding," she exclaimed.

He shook his head. "Nope."

Seeing me stroll over, she turned to me. "Rose, you're never going to believe this. "You know Abby Badica? And Xander? Their guardian wants to resign. And marry *another* guardian."

Now this was exciting gossip. A scandal, actually. "Seriously? Are they, like, going to run off together?"

She nodded. "They're getting a house. Going to get jobs with humans, I

guess."

I glanced at Aaron, who had suddenly turned shy with me there. "How are Abby and Xander dealing with that?"

"Okay. Embarrassed. They think it's stupid." Then he realized who he was speaking to. "Oh. I didn't mean—"

"Whatever." I gave him a tight smile. "It *is* stupid."

Wow. I was stunned. The rebellious part me of loved any story where people "fought the system." Only, in this case, they were fighting *my* system, the one I'd been trained to believe in my entire life.

Dhampirs and Moroi had a strange arrangement. Dhampirs had originally been born from Moroi mixing with humans. Unfortunately, dhampirs couldn't reproduce with each other—or with humans. It was a weird genetic thing. Mules were the same way, I'd been told, though that wasn't a comparison I really liked hearing. Dhampirs and full Moroi *could* have children together, and, through another genetic oddity, their kids came out as standard dhampirs, with half human genes, half vampire genes.

With Moroi being the only ones with whom dhampirs could reproduce, we had to stay close to them and intermingle with them. Likewise, it became important to us that the Moroi simply *survived*. Without them, we were done. And with the way Strigoi loved picking off Moroi, their survival became a legitimate concern for us.

That was how the guardian system developed. Dhampirs couldn't work magic, but we made great warriors. We'd inherited enhanced senses and reflexes from our vampire genes and better strength and endurance from our human genes. We also weren't limited by a need for blood or trouble with sunlight. Sure, we weren't as powerful as the Strigoi, but we trained hard, and guardians did a kick-ass job at keeping Moroi safe. Most dhampirs felt it was worth risking their own lives to make sure our kind could still keep having children.

Since Moroi usually wanted to have and raise Moroi children, you didn't find a lot of long-term Moroi-dhampir romances. You especially didn't find a lot of Moroi women hooking up with dhampir guys. But plenty of young Moroi men liked fooling around with dhampir women, although those guys usually went on to marry Moroi women. That left a lot of single dhampir mothers, but we were tough and could handle it.

However, many dhampir mothers chose not to become guardians in order to raise their children. These women sometimes worked "regular" jobs with Moroi or humans; some of them lived together in communities. These communities had a bad reputation. I don't know how much of it was true, but rumors said Moroi men visited *all the time* for sex. and that some dhampir women let them drink blood while doing it. Blood whores.

Regardless, almost all guardians were men, which meant there were a lot more Moroi than guardians. Most dhampir guys accepted that they wouldn't have kids. They knew it was their job to protect Moroi while their sisters and cousins had babies.

Some dhampir women, like my mother, still felt it was their duty to become guardians—even if it meant not raising their own kids. After I'd been born, she'd handed me over to be raised by Moroi. Moroi and dhampirs start school

pretty young, and the Academy had essentially taken over as my parent by the time I was four.

Between her example and my life at the Academy, I believed wholeheartedly that it was a dhampir's job to protect Moroi. It was part of our heritage, *and* it was the only way we'd keep going. It was that simple.

And that was what made what the Badicas' guardian had done so shocking. He'd abandoned his Moroi and run off with another guardian, which meant she'd abandoned *her* Moroi. They couldn't even have children together, and now two families were unprotected. What was the point? No one cared if teenage dhampirs dated or if adult dhampirs had flings. But a long-term relationship? Particularly one that involved them running away? A complete waste. And a disgrace.

After a little more speculation on the Badicas, Lissa and I left Aaron. As we stepped outside, I heard a funny shifting sound and then something sliding. Too late, I realized what was happening, just as a pile of slush slid off the chapel's roof and onto us. It was early October, and we'd had early snow last night that had started melting almost immediately. As a result, the stuff that fell on us was very wet and very cold.

Lissa took the brunt of it, but I still yelped as icy water landed on my hair and neck. A few others squealed nearby too, having caught the edge of the mini-avalanche.

"You okay?" I asked her. Her coat was drenched, and her platinum hair clung to the sides of her face.

"Y-yeah," she said through chattering teeth.

I pulled off my coat and handed it to her. It had a slick surface and had repelled most of the water. "Take yours off."

"But you'll be—"

"Take this."

She did, and as she slipped on my coat, I finally tuned into the laughter that always follows these situations. I avoided the eyes, instead focusing on holding Lissa's wet jacket while she changed.

"Wish you hadn't been wearing a coat, Rose," said Ralf Sarcozy, an unusually bulky and plump Moroi. I hated him. "That shirt would have looked good wet."

"That shirt's so ugly it should be burned. Did you get that from a homeless person?"

I glanced up as Mia walked over and looped her arm through Aaron's. Her blond curls were arranged perfectly, and she had on an awesome pair of black heels that would have looked much better on me. At least they made her look taller, I'd give her that. Aaron had been a few steps behind us but had miraculously avoided being nailed by the slush. Seeing how smug she looked, I decided there'd been no miracles involved.

"I suppose you want to offer to burn it, huh?" I asked, refusing to let her know how much that insult bugged me. I knew perfectly well my fashion sense had slipped over the last two years. "Oh, wait—fire isn't your element, is it? You work with water. What a coincidence that a bunch just fell on us."

Mia looked as if she'd been insulted, but the gleam in her eyes showed that she was enjoying this way too much to be an innocent bystander. "What's that

supposed to mean?"

"Nothing to me. But Ms. Kirova will probably have something to say when she finds out you used magic against another student."

"That wasn't an attack," she scoffed. "And it wasn't me. It was an act of God."

A few others laughed, much to her delight. In my imagination, I responded with, *So is this*, and then slammed her into the side of the church. In real life, Lissa simply nudged me and said, "Let's go."

She and I walked off toward our respective dorms, leaving behind laughter and jokes about our wet states and how Lissa wouldn't know anything about specialization. Inside, I seethed. I had to do something about Mia, I realized. In addition to the general irritation of Mia's bitchiness, I didn't want Lissa to have to deal with any more stress than she had to. We'd been okay this first week, and I wanted to keep it that way.

"You know," I said, "I'm thinking more and more that you stealing Aaron back is a good thing. It'll teach Bitch Doll a lesson. I bet it'd be easy, too. He's still crazy about you."

"I don't want to teach anyone a lesson," said Lissa. "And *I'm* not crazy about him."

"Come on, she picks fights and talks about us behind our backs. She accused me of getting jeans from the Salvation Army yesterday."

"Your jeans *are* from the Salvation Army."

"Well, yeah," I snorted, "but she has no right making fun of them when she's wearing stuff from Target."

"Hey, there's nothing wrong with Target. I like Target."

"So do I. That's not the point. She's trying to pass her stuff off like it's freaking Stella McCartney."

"And that's a crime?"

I affected a solemn face. "Absolutely. You've gotta take revenge."

"I told you, I'm not interested in revenge." Lissa cut me a sidelong look. "And you shouldn't be either."

I smiled as innocently as I could, and when we parted ways, I felt relieved again that she couldn't read my thoughts.

"So when's the big catfight going to happen?"

Mason was waiting for me outside our dorm after I'd parted ways with Lissa. He looked lazy and cute, leaning against the wall with crossed arms as he watched me.

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

He unfolded himself and walked with me into the building, handing me his coat, since I'd let Lissa go off with my dry one. "I saw you guys sparring outside the chapel. Have you no respect for the house of God?"

I snorted. "You've got about as much respect for it as I do, you heathen. You didn't even go. Besides, as you said, we were *outside*."

"And you still didn't answer the question."

I just grinned and slipped on his coat.

We stood in the common area of our dorm, a well-supervised lounge and study area where male and female students could mingle, along with Moroi guests. Being Sunday, it was pretty crowded with those cramming for last-

minute assignments due tomorrow. Spying a small, empty table, I grabbed Mason's arm and pulled him toward it.

"Aren't you supposed to go straight to your room?"

I hunkered down in my seat, glancing around warily. "There are so many people here today, it'll take them a while to notice me. God, I'm so sick of being locked away. And it's only been a week."

"I'm sick of it too. We missed you last night. A bunch of us went and shot pool in the rec room. Eddie was on fire."

I groaned. "Don't tell me that. I don't want to hear about your glamorous social life."

"All right." He propped his elbow up on the table and rested his chin in his hand. "Then tell me about Mia. You're just going to turn around and punch her one day, aren't you? I think I remember you doing that at least ten times with people that pissed you off."

"I'm a new, reformed Rose," I said, doing my best impression of demure. Which wasn't very good. He emitted a choking sort of laugh. "Besides, if I do that, I'll have broken my probation with Kirova. Gotta walk the straight and narrow."

"In other words, find some way to get back at Mia that you won't get in trouble for."

I felt a smile tug at the corners of my lips. "You know what I like about you, Mase? You think just like I do."

"Frightening concept," he replied drily. "So tell me what you think of this: I might know something about her, but I probably shouldn't tell you. . . ."

I leaned forward. "Oh, you already tipped me off. You've *got* to tell me now."

"It'd be wrong," he teased. "How do I know you'd use this knowledge for good instead of evil?"

I batted my eyelashes. "Can you resist this face?"

He took a moment to study me. "No. I can't, actually. Okay, here you go: Mia isn't royal."

I slouched back in my chair. "No kidding. I already knew that. I've known who's royal since I was two."

"Yeah, but there's more than just that. Her parents work for one of the Drozdov lords." I waved my hand impatiently. A lot of Moroi worked out in the human world, but Moroi society had plenty of jobs for its own kind too. Someone had to fill them. "Cleaning stuff. Practically servants. Her dad cuts grass, and her mom's a maid."

I actually had a healthy respect for anyone who pulled a full day's work, regardless of the job. People everywhere had to do crappy stuff to make a living. But, much like with Target, it became another matter altogether when someone was trying to pass herself off as something else. And in the week that I'd been here, I'd picked up on how desperately Mia wanted to fit in with the school elite.

"No one knows," I said thoughtfully.

"And she doesn't want them to. You know how the royals are." He paused. "Well, except for Lissa, of course. They'd give Mia a hard time over it."

"How do you know all this?"

"My uncle's a guardian for the Drozdovs."

"And you've just been sitting on this secret, huh?"

"Until you broke me. So which path will you choose: good or evil?"

"I think I'll give her a grace—"

"Miss Hathaway, you know you aren't supposed to be here."

One of the dorm matrons stood over us, disapproval all over her face.

I hadn't been joking when I said Mason thought like me. He could bullshit as well as I could. "We have a group project to do for our humanities class. How are we supposed to do it if Rose is in isolation?"

The matron narrowed her eyes. "You don't look like you're doing work."

I slid over the priest's book and opened it at random. I'd placed it on the table when we sat down. "We're, um, working on this."

She still looked suspicious. "One hour. I'll give you one more hour down here, and I'd better actually see you working."

"Yes, ma'am," said Mason straight-faced. "Absolutely."

She wandered off, still eyeing us. "My hero," I declared.

He pointed at the book. "What is this?"

"Something the priest gave me. I had a question about the service."

He stared at me, astonished.

"Oh, stop it and look interested." I skimmed the index. "I'm trying to find some woman named Anna."

Mason slid his chair over so that he was sitting right beside me. "All right. Let's 'study.'"

I found a page number, and it took me to the section on St. Vladimir, not surprisingly. We read through the chapter, scanning for Anna's name. When we found it, the author didn't have much to say about her. He did include an excerpt written by some guy who had apparently lived at the same time as St. Vladimir:

And with Vladimir always is Anna, the daughter of Fyodor. Their love is as chaste and pure as that of brother and sister, and many times has she defended him from Strigoi who would seek to destroy him and his holiness. Likewise, it is she who comforts him when the spirit becomes too much to bear, and Satan's darkness tries to smother him and weaken his own health and body. This too she defends against, for they have been bound together ever since he saved her life as a child. It is a sign of God's love that He has sent the blessed Vladimir a guardian such as her, one who is shadow-kissed and always knows what is in his heart and mind.

"There you go," Mason said. "She was his guardian."

"It doesn't say what 'shadow-kissed' means."

"Probably doesn't mean anything."

Something in me didn't believe that. I read it again, trying to make sense of the old-fashioned language. Mason watched me curiously, looking like he very much wanted to help.

"Maybe they were hooking up," he suggested.

I laughed. "He was a *saint*."

"So? Saints probably like sex too. That 'brother and sister' stuff is probably a cover." He pointed to one of the lines. "See? They were 'bound' together." He winked. "It's code."

Bound. It was a weird word choice, but that didn't necessarily mean Anna and Vladimir were ripping each other's clothes off.

"I don't think so. They're just close. Guys and girls can just be friends." I said it pointedly, and he gave me a dry look.

"Yeah? *We're* friends, and I don't know what's in your 'heart and mind.'" Mason put on a fake philosopher's look. "Of course, some might argue that one can never know what's in the heart of a woman—"

"Oh, shut up," I groaned, punching him in the arm.

"For they are strange and mysterious creatures," he continued in his scholarly voice, "and a man must be a mind reader if he ever wishes to make them happy."

I started giggling uncontrollably and knew I'd probably get in trouble again. "Well, try to read my mind and stop being such a—"

I stopped laughing and looked back down at the book.

Bound together and *always knows what is in his heart and mind*.

They had a bond, I realized. I would have bet everything I owned—which wasn't much—on it. The revelation was astonishing. There were lots of vague stories and myths about how guardians and Moroi 'used to have bonds.' But this was the first I'd ever heard of anyone specific that it had happened to.

Mason had noticed my startled reaction. "You okay? You look kind of weird."

I shrugged it off. "Yeah. Fine."

SEVEN

A COUPLE WEEKS PASSED AFTER that, and I soon forgot about the Anna thing as life at the Academy wrapped around me. The shock of our return had worn off a little, and we began to fall into a semi-comfortable routine. My days revolved around church, lunch with Lissa, and whatever sort of social life I could scrape together outside of that. Denied any real free time, I didn't have too hard a time staying out of the spotlight, although I did manage to steal a little attention here and there, despite my noble speech to her about 'coasting through the middle.' I couldn't help it. I liked flirting, I liked groups, and I liked making smartass comments in class.

Her new, incognito role attracted attention simply because it was so different than before we'd left, back when she'd been so active with the royals. Most people soon let that go, accepting that the Dragomir princess was fading off the social radar and content to run with Natalie and her group. Natalie's rambling still made me want to beat my head against a wall sometimes, but she was really nice—nicer than almost any of the other royals—and I enjoyed hanging around her most of the time.

And, just as Kirova had warned, I was indeed training and working out all the time. But as more time passed, my body stopped hating me. My muscles grew tougher, and my stamina increased. I still got my ass kicked in practice but not quite as badly as I used to, which was something. The biggest toll now seemed to be on my skin. Being outside in the cold so much was chapping my face, and only Lissa's constant supply of skin-care lotions kept me from aging before my time. She couldn't do much for the blisters on my hands and feet.

A routine also developed with Dimitri and me. Mason had been right about him being antisocial. Dimitri didn't hang out much with the other guardians, though it was clear they all respected him. And the more I worked with him, the more I respected him too, though I didn't really understand his training methods. They didn't seem very badass. We always started by stretching in the gym, and lately he'd been sending me outside to run, braving the increasingly cold Montana autumn.

Three weeks after my return to the Academy, I walked into the gym before school one day and found him sprawled on a mat, reading a Louis L'Amour book. Someone had brought in a portable CD player, and while that cheered me up at first, the song coming from it did not: "When Doves Cry" by Prince. It was embarrassing to know the title, but one of our former housemates had been obsessed with the '80s.

“Whoa, Dimitri,” I said, tossing my bag on the floor. “I realize this is actually a current hit in Eastern Europe right now, but do you think we could maybe listen to something that wasn’t recorded before I was born?”

Only his eyes flicked toward me; the rest of his posture remained the same. “What does it matter to you? I’m the one who’s going to be listening to it. You’ll be outside running.”

I made a face as I set my foot up on one of the bars and stretched my hamstrings. All things considered, Dimitri had a good-natured tolerance for my snarkiness. So long as I didn’t slack in my training, he didn’t mind my running commentary.

“Hey,” I asked, moving on to the next set of stretches, “what’s with all the running, anyway? I mean, I realize the importance of stamina and all that, but shouldn’t I be moving on to something with a little hitting? They’re still killing me in group practice.”

“Maybe you should hit harder,” he replied drily.

“I’m serious.”

“Hard to tell the difference.” He set the book down but didn’t move from his sprawl. “My job is to get you ready to defend the princess and fight dark creatures, right?”

“Yup.”

“So tell me this: suppose you manage to kidnap her again and take her off to the mall. While you’re there, a Strigoi comes at you. What will you do?”

“Depends on what store we’re in.”

He looked at me.

“Fine. I’ll stab him with a silver stake.”

Dimitri sat up now, crossing his long legs in one fluid motion. I still couldn’t figure out how someone so tall could be so graceful. “Oh?” He raised his dark eyebrows. “Do you have a silver stake? Do you even know how to use one?”

I dragged my eyes away from his body and scowled. Made with elemental magic, silver stakes were a guardian’s deadliest weapon. Stabbing a Strigoi through the heart with one meant instant death. The blades were also lethal to Moroi, so they weren’t given out lightly to novices. My classmates had just started learning how to use them. I’d trained with a gun before, but no one would let me near a stake yet. Fortunately, there were two other ways to kill a Strigoi.

“Okay. I’ll cut his head off.”

“Ignoring the fact that you don’t have a weapon to do that, how will you compensate for the fact that he may be a foot taller than you?”

I straightened up from touching my toes, annoyed. “Fine, then I’ll set him on fire.”

“Again, with what?”

“All right, I give up. You’ve already got the answer. You’re just messing with me. I’m at the mall and I see a Strigoi. What do I do?”

He looked at me and didn’t blink. “You run.”

I repressed the urge to throw something at him. When I finished my stretches, he told me he’d run with me. That was a first. Maybe running would give me some insight into his killer reputation.

We set out into the chilly October evening. Being back on a vampiric

schedule still felt weird to me. With school about to start in an hour, I expected the sun to be coming up, not down. But it was sinking on the western horizon, lighting up the snow-capped mountains with an orange glow. It didn't really warm things up, and I soon felt the cold pierce my lungs as my need for oxygen deepened. We didn't speak. He slowed his pace to match mine, so we stayed together.

Something about that bothered me; I suddenly very much wanted his approval. So I picked up my own pace, working my lungs and muscles harder. Twelve laps around the track made three miles; we had nine more to go.

When we reached the third-to-last loop, a couple of other novices passed by, preparing to go to the group practice I'd soon be at as well. Seeing me, Mason cheered. "Good form, Rose!"

I smiled and waved back.

"You're slowing down," Dimitri snapped, jerking my gaze from the boys. The harshness in his voice startled me. "Is this why your times aren't getting any faster? You're easily distracted?"

Embarrassed, I increased my speed once more, despite the fact that my body started screaming obscenities at me. We finished the twelve laps, and when he checked, he found we'd shaved two minutes off my best time.

"Not bad, huh?" I crowed when we headed back inside for cool-down stretches. "Looks like I could get as far as the Limited before the Strigoi got me at the mall. Not sure how Lissa would do."

"If she was with you, she'd be okay."

I looked up in surprise. It was the first real compliment he'd paid me since I started training with him. His brown eyes watched me, both approving and amused.

And that's when it happened.

I felt like someone had shot me. Sharp and biting, terror exploded in my body and in my head. Small razors of pain. My vision blurred, and for a moment, I wasn't standing there. I was running down a flight of stairs, scared and desperate, needing to get out of there, needing to find . . . me.

My vision cleared, leaving me back on the track and out of Lissa's head. Without a word to Dimitri, I tore off, running as fast as I could toward the Moroi dorm. It didn't matter that I'd just put my legs through a mini-marathon. They ran hard and fast, like they were shiny and new. Distantly, I was aware of Dimitri catching up to me, asking me what was wrong. But I couldn't answer him. I had one task and one alone: get to the dorm.

Its looming, ivy-covered form was just coming into view when Lissa met up with us, her face streaked with tears. I came to a jarring stop, my lungs ready to burst.

"What's wrong? What happened?" I demanded, clutching her arms, forcing her to look into my eyes.

But she couldn't answer. She just flung her arms around me, sobbing into my chest. I held her there, stroking her sleek, silky hair while I told her it was going to be all right—whatever 'it' was. And honestly, I didn't care what it was just then. She was here, and she was safe, which was all that mattered. Dimitri hovered over us, alert and ready for any threat, his body coiled to attack. I felt safe with him beside us.

A half hour later, we were crammed inside Lissa's dorm room with three other guardians, Ms. Kirova, and the hall matron. This was the first time I'd seen Lissa's room. Natalie had indeed managed to get her as a roommate, and the two sides of the room were a study in contrasts. Natalie's looked lived in, with pictures on the wall and a frilly bedspread that wasn't dorm-issue. Lissa had as few possessions as I did, making her half noticeably bare. She did have one picture taped to the wall, a picture taken from last Halloween, when we'd dressed up like fairies, complete with wings and glittery makeup. Seeing that picture and remembering how things used to be made a dull pain form in my chest.

With all the excitement, no one seemed to remember that I wasn't supposed to be in there. Outside in the hall, other Moroi girls crowded together, trying to figure out what was going on. Natalie pushed her way through them, wondering what the commotion in her room was. When she discovered it, she came to a screeching halt.

Shock and disgust showed on almost everyone's faces as we stared at Lissa's bed. There was a fox on the pillow. Its coat was reddish-orange, tinged in white. It looked so soft and cuddly that it could have been a pet, perhaps a cat, something you'd hold in your arms and snuggle with.

Aside from the fact that its throat had been slit.

The inside of the throat looked pink and jellylike. Blood stained that soft coat and had run down onto the yellow bedspread, forming a dark pool that spread across the fabric. The fox's eyes stared upward, glazed, over with a sort of shocked look about them, like the fox couldn't believe this was happening.

Nausea built up in my stomach, but I forced myself to keep looking. I couldn't afford to be squeamish. I'd be killing Strigoi someday. If I couldn't handle a fox, I'd never survive major kills.

What had happened to the fox was sick and twisted, obviously done by someone too fucked up for words. Lissa stared at it, her face death-pale, and took a few steps toward it, hand involuntarily reaching out. This gross act hit her hard, I knew, digging at her love of animals. She loved them, they loved her. While on our own, she'd often begged me for a pet, but I'd always refused and reminded her we couldn't take care of one when we might have to flee at a moment's notice. Plus, they hated me. So she'd contented herself with helping and patching up strays she found and making friends with other people's pets, like Oscar the cat.

She couldn't patch this fox up, though. There was no coming back for it, but I saw in her face she wanted to help it, like she helped everything. I took her hand and steered her away, suddenly recalling a conversation from two years ago.

"What is that? Is it a crow?"

"Too big. It's a raven."

"Is it dead?"

"Yeah. Definitely dead. Don't touch it."

She hadn't listened to me back then. I hoped she would now.

"It was still alive when I got back," Lissa whispered to me, clutching my arm. "Barely. Oh God, it was twitching. It must have suffered so much."

I felt bile rise in my throat now. Under no circumstances would I throw up.

“Did you—?”

“No. I wanted to. . . . I started to. . . .”

“Then forget about it,” I said sharply. “It’s stupid. Somebody’s stupid joke. They’ll clean it up. Probably even give you a new room if you want.”

She turned to me, eyes almost wild. “Rose . . . do you remember . . . that one time. . . .”

“Stop it,” I said. “Forget about it. This isn’t the same thing.”

“What if someone saw? What if someone knows? . . .”

I tightened my grip on her arm, digging my nails in to get her attention. She flinched. “No. It’s not the same. It has nothing to do with that. Do you hear me?” I could feel both Natalie and Dimitri’s eyes on us. “It’s going to be okay. Everything’s going to be okay.”

Not looking like she believed me at all, Lissa nodded.

“Get this cleaned up,” Kirova snapped to the matron. “And find out if anyone saw anything.”

Someone finally realized I was there and ordered Dimitri to take me away, no matter how much I begged them to let me stay with Lissa. He walked me back to the novices’ dorm. He didn’t speak until we were almost there. “You know something. Something about what happened. Is this what you meant when you told Headmistress Kirova that Lissa was in danger?”

“I don’t know anything. It’s just some sick joke.”

“Do you have any idea who’d do it? Or why?”

I considered this. Before we’d left, it could have been any number of people. That was the way it was when you were popular. People loved you, people hated you. But now? Lissa had faded off to a certain extent. The only person who really and truly despised her was Mia, but Mia seemed to fight her battles with words, not actions. And even if she did decide to do something more aggressive, why do this? She didn’t seem like the type. There were a million other ways to get back at a person.

“No,” I told him. “No clue.”

“Rose, if you know something, tell me. We’re on the same side. We both want to protect her. This is serious.”

I spun around, taking my anger over the fox out on him. “Yeah, it *is* serious. It’s all serious. And you have me doing laps every day when I should be learning to fight and defend her! If you want to help her, then teach me something! *Teach me how to fight*. I already know how to run away.”

I didn’t realize until that moment how badly I did want to learn, how I wanted to prove myself to him, to Lissa, and to everyone else. The fox incident had made me feel powerless, and I didn’t like that. I wanted to do something, *anything*.

Dimitri watched my outburst calmly, with no change in his expression. When I finished, he simply beckoned me forward like I hadn’t said anything. “Come on. You’re late for practice.”

EIGHT

BURNING WITH ANGER, I FOUGHT harder and better that day than I ever had in any of my classes with the novices. So much so that I finally won my first hand-to-hand pairing, annihilating Shane Reyes. We'd always gotten along, and he took it good-naturedly, applauding my performance, as did a few others.

"The comeback's starting," observed Mason after class.

"So it would seem."

He gently touched my arm. "How's Lissa?"

It didn't surprise me that he knew. Gossip spread so fast around here sometimes, it felt like everyone had a psychic bond.

"Okay. Coping." I didn't elaborate on how I knew that. Our bond was a secret from the student body. "Mase, you claim to know about Mia. You think she might have done that?"

"Whoa, hey, I'm not an expert on her or anything. But honestly? No. Mia won't even do dissections in biology. I can't picture her actually catching a fox, let alone, um, killing it."

"Any friends who might do it for her?"

He shook his head. "Not really. They're not really the types to get their hands dirty either. But who knows?"

Lissa was still shaken when I met her for lunch later, her mood made worse when Natalie and her crew wouldn't shut up about the fox. Apparently Natalie had overcome her disgust enough to enjoy the attention the spectacle had brought her. Maybe she wasn't as content with her fringe status as I'd always believed.

"And it was just *there*," she explained, waving her hands for emphasis. "Right in the middle of the bed. There was blood *everywhere*."

Lissa looked as green as the sweater she wore, and I pulled her away before I even finished my food and immediately launched into a string of obscenities about Natalie's social skills.

"She's nice," Lissa said automatically. "You were just telling me the other day how much you liked her."

"I do like her, but she's just incompetent about certain things."

We stood outside our animal behavior class, and I noticed people giving us curious looks and whispering as they passed. I sighed.

"How are you doing with all this?"

A half-smile crossed her face. "Can't you already feel it?"

"Yeah, but I want to hear it from you."

"I don't know. I'll be okay. I wish everyone wouldn't keep staring at me like I'm some kind of freak."

My anger exploded again. The fox was bad. People upsetting her made it worse, but at least I could do something about them. "Who's bothering you?"

"Rose, you can't beat up everyone we have a problem with."

"Mia?" I guessed.

"And others," she said evasively. "Look, it doesn't matter. What I want to know is how this could have . . . that is, I can't stop thinking about that time —"

"Don't," I warned.

"Why do you keep pretending that didn't happen? You of all people. You made fun of Natalie for going on and on, but it's not like you've got a good grip on your control switch. You'll normally talk about anything."

"But not *that*. We need to forget about it. It was a long time ago. We don't even really know what happened."

She stared at me with those big green eyes, calculating her next argument.

"Hey, Rose."

Our conversation dropped as Jesse strolled up to us. I turned on my best smile.

"Hey."

He nodded cordially to Lissa. "So hey, I'm going to be in your dorm tonight for a study group. You think . . . maybe . . ."

Momentarily forgetting Lissa, I focused my full attention on Jesse. Suddenly, I *so* needed to do something wild and bad. Too much had happened today. "Sure."

He told me when he'd be there, and I told him I'd meet him in one of the common areas with "further instructions."

Lissa stared at me when he left. "You're under house arrest. They won't let you hang out and talk to him."

"I don't really want to 'talk' to him. We'll slip away."

She groaned. "I just don't know about you sometimes."

"That's because you're the cautious one, and I'm the reckless one."

Once animal behavior started, I pondered the likelihood of Mia being responsible. From the smug look on her psycho-angel face, she certainly seemed to be enjoying the sensation caused by the bloody fox. But that didn't mean she was the culprit, and after observing her over the last couple of weeks, I knew she'd enjoy anything that upset Lissa and me. She didn't need to be the one who had done it.

"Wolves, like many other species, differentiate their packs into alpha males and alpha females whom the others defer to. Alphas are almost always the strongest physically, though many times, confrontations turn out to be more a matter of willpower and personality. When an alpha is challenged and replaced, that wolf may find himself ostracized from the group or even attacked."

I looked up from my daydreams and focused on Ms. Meissner.

"Most challenges are likely to occur during mating season," she continued. This, naturally, brought snickers from the class. "In most packs, the alpha pair

are the *only* ones who mate. If the alpha male is an older, seasoned wolf, a younger competitor may think he has a shot. Whether that is true works on a case-by-case basis. The young often don't realize how seriously outclassed they are by the more experienced."

The old-and-young-wolf thing notwithstanding, I thought the rest was pretty relevant. Certainly in the Academy's social structure, I decided bitterly, there seemed to be a lot of alphas and challenges.

Mia raised her hand. "What about foxes? Do *they* have alphas too?"

There was a collective intake of breath from the class, followed by a few nervous giggles. No one could believe Mia had gone there.

Ms. Meissner flushed with what I suspected was anger. "We're discussing wolves today, Miss Rinaldi."

Mia didn't seem to mind the subtle chastising, and when the class paired off to work on an assignment, she spent more time looking over at us and giggling. Through the bond, I could feel Lissa growing more and more upset as images of the fox kept flashing through her mind.

"Don't worry," I told her. "I've got a way—"

"Hey, Lissa," someone interrupted.

We both looked up as Ralf Sarcozy stopped by our desks. He wore his trademark stupid grin, and I had a feeling he'd come over here on a dare from his friends.

"So, admit it," he said. "You killed the fox. You're trying to convince Kirova you're crazy so that you can get out of here again."

"Screw you," I told him in a low voice.

"Are you offering?"

"From what I've heard, there isn't much to screw," I shot back.

"Wow," he said mockingly. "You *have* changed. Last I remembered, you weren't too picky about who you got naked with."

"And the last *I* remember, the only people you ever saw naked were on the Internet."

He cocked his head in an overly dramatic fashion. "Hey, I just got it: it was you, wasn't it?" He looked at Lissa, the back at me. "She got *you* to kill the fox, didn't she? Some weird kind of lesbian voo—ahhh!"

Ralf burst into flames.

I jumped up and pushed Lissa out of the way—not easy to do, since we were sitting at our desks. We both ended up on the floor as screams—Ralf's in particular—filled the classroom and Ms. Meissner sprinted for the fire extinguisher.

And then, just like that, the flames disappeared. Ralf was still screaming and patting himself down, but he didn't have a single singe mark on him. The only indication of what had happened was the lingering smell of smoke in the air.

For several seconds, the entire classroom froze. Then, slowly, everyone put the pieces together. Moroi magical specializations were well known, and after scanning the room, I deduced three fire users: Ralf, his friend Jacob, and—

Christian Ozera.

Since neither Jacob nor Ralf would have set Ralf on fire, it sort of made the culprit obvious. The fact that Christian was laughing hysterically sort of gave it away too. Ms. Meissner changed from red to deep purple. "Mr. Ozera!" she

screamed. “How dare you—do you have any idea—report to Headmistress Kirova’s office now!”

Christian, completely unfazed, stood up and slung his backpack over one shoulder. That smirk stayed on his face. “Sure thing, Ms. Meissner.”

He went out of his way to walk past Ralf, who quickly backed away as he passed. The rest of the class stared, openmouthed.

After that, Ms. Meissner attempted to return the class to normal, but it was a lost cause. No one could stop talking about what had happened. It was shocking on a few different levels. First, no one had ever seen that kind of spell: a massive fire that didn’t actually burn anything. Second, Christian had used it offensively. He had attacked another person. Moroi never did that. They believed magic was meant to take care of the earth, to help people live better lives. It was never, ever used as a weapon. Magic instructors never taught those kinds of spells; I don’t think they even knew any. Finally, craziest of all, *Christian* had done it. Christian, whom no one ever noticed or gave a damn about. Well, they’d noticed him now.

It appeared someone still knew offensive spells after all, and as much as I had enjoyed the look of terror on Ralf’s face, it suddenly occurred to me that Christian might really and truly be a psycho.

“Liss,” I said as we walked out of class, “please tell me you haven’t hung out with him again.”

The guilt that flickered through the bond told me more than any explanation could.

“Liss!” I grabbed her arm.

“Not that much,” she said uneasily. “He’s really okay—”

“Okay? *Okay*?” People in the hall stared at us. I realized I was practically shouting. “He’s out of his mind. *He set Ralf on fire.* I thought we decided you weren’t going to see him anymore.”

“You decided, Rose. Not me.” There was an edge in her voice I hadn’t heard in a while.

“What’s going on here? Are you guys . . . you know? . . .”

“No!” she insisted. “I told you that already. God.” She shot me a look of disgust. “Not everyone thinks—and acts—like you.”

I flinched at the words. Then we noticed that Mia was passing by. She hadn’t heard the conversation but had caught the tone. A snide smile spread over her face. “Trouble in paradise?”

“Go find your pacifier, and shut the hell up,” I told her, not waiting to hear her response. Her mouth dropped open, then tightened into a scowl.

Lissa and I walked on in silence, and then Lissa burst out laughing. Like that, our fight diffused.

“Rose . . .” Her tone was softer now.

“Lissa, he’s dangerous. I don’t like him. Please be careful.”

She touched my arm. “I am. I’m the cautious one, remember? You’re the reckless one.”

I hoped that was still true.

But later, after school, I had my doubts. I was in my room doing homework when I felt a trickle of what could only be called sneakiness coming from Lissa. Losing track of my work, I stared off into space, trying to get a more

detailed understanding of what was happening to her. If ever there was a time for me to slip into her mind, it was now, but I didn't know how to control that.

Frowning, I tried to think what normally made that connection occur. Usually she was experiencing some strong emotion, an emotion so powerful it tried to blast into my mind. I had to work hard to fight against that; I always sort of kept a mental wall up.

Focusing on her now, I tried to remove the wall. I steadied my breathing and cleared my mind. My thoughts didn't matter, only hers did. I needed to open myself to her and let us connect.

I'd never done anything like this before; I didn't have the patience for meditation. My need was so strong, however, that I forced myself into an intense, focused relaxation. I needed to know what was going on with her, and after a few more moments, my effort paid off.

I was in.

NINE

I SNAPPED INTO HER MIND, once again seeing and directly experiencing what went on around her.

She was sneaking into the chapel's attic again, confirming my worst fears. Like last time, she met no resistance. *Good God,* I thought, *could that priest be any worse about securing his own chapel?*

Sunrise lit up the stained-glass window, and Christian's silhouette was framed against it: he was sitting in the window seat.

"You're late," he told her. "Been waiting a while."

Lissa pulled up one of the rickety chairs, brushing dust off it. "I figured you'd be tied up with Headmistress Kirova."

He shook his head. "Not much to it. They suspended me for a week, that's all. Not like it's hard to sneak out." He waved his hands around. "As you can see."

"I'm surprised you didn't get more time."

A patch of sunlight lit up his crystal-blue eyes. "Disappointed?"

She looked shocked. "You set someone on fire!"

"No, I didn't. Did you see any burns on him?"

"He was covered in flames."

"I had them under control. I kept them off of him."

She sighed. "You shouldn't have done that."

Straightening out of his lounging position, he sat up and leaned toward her. "I did it for you."

"You attacked someone for me?"

"Sure. He was giving you and Rose a hard time. She was doing an okay job against him, I guess, but I figured she could use the backup. Besides, this'll shut anyone else up about the whole fox thing, too."

"You shouldn't have done that," she repeated, looking away. She didn't know how to feel about this "generosity." "And don't act like it was all for me. You *liked* doing it. Part of you wanted to—just because."

Christian's smug expression dropped, replaced by one of uncharacteristic surprise. Lissa might not be psychic, but she had a startling ability to read people.

Seeing him off guard, she continued. "Attacking someone else with magic is forbidden—and that's *exactly* why you wanted to do it. You got a thrill out of it."

"Those rules are stupid. If we used magic as a weapon instead of just for

warm and fuzzy shit, Strigoi wouldn't keep killing so many of us."

"It's wrong," she said firmly. "Magic is a gift. It's peaceful."

"Only because they say it is. You're repeating the party line we've been fed our whole lives." He stood up and paced the small space of the attic. "It wasn't always that way, you know. We used to fight, right along with the guardians—centuries ago. Then people started getting scared and stopped. Figured it was safer to just hide. They forgot the attack spells."

"Then how did you know that one?"

He crooked her a smile. "Not everyone forgot."

"Like your family? Like your parents?"

The smile disappeared. "You don't know anything about my parents."

His face darkened, his eyes grew hard. To most people, he might have appeared scary and intimidating, but as Lissa studied and admired his features, he suddenly seemed very, very vulnerable.

"You're right," she admitted softly, after a moment. "I don't. I'm sorry."

For the second time in this meeting, Christian looked astonished. Probably no one apologized to him that often. Hell, no one even talked to him that often. Certainly no one ever listened. Like usual, he quickly turned into his cocky self.

"Forget it." Abruptly, he stopped pacing and knelt in front of her so they could look each other in the eye. Feeling him so close made her hold her breath. A dangerous smile curled his lips. "And really, I don't get why *you* of all people should act so outraged that I used 'forbidden' magic."

"Me 'of all people'? What's that supposed to mean?"

"You can play all innocent if you want—and you do a pretty good job—but I know the truth."

"What truth is that?" She couldn't hide her uneasiness from me or Christian.

He leaned even closer. "That you use compulsion. All the time."

"No, I don't," she said immediately.

"Of course you do. I've been lying awake at night, trying to figure out how in the world you two were able to rent out a place and go to high school without anyone ever wanting to meet your parents. Then I figured it out. You had to be using compulsion. That's probably how you broke out of here in the first place."

"I see. You just figured it out. Without any proof."

"I've got all the proof I need, just from watching you."

"You've been watching me—spying on me—to prove I'm using compulsion?"

He shrugged. "No. Actually, I've been watching you just because I like it. The compulsion thing was a bonus. I saw you use it the other day to get an extension on that math assignment. And you used it on Ms. Carmack when she wanted to make you go through more testing."

"So you assume it's compulsion? Maybe I'm just really good at convincing people." There was a defiant note in her voice: understandable, considering her fear and anger. Only she delivered it with a toss of her hair which—if I didn't know any better—might have been considered flirtatious. And I did know better . . . right? Suddenly, I wasn't sure.

He went on, but something in his eyes told me he'd noticed the hair, that he

always noticed everything about her. “People get these goofy looks on their faces when you talk to them. And not just any people—you’re able to do it to Moroi. Probably dhampirs, too. Now *that’s* crazy. I didn’t even know that was possible. You’re some kind of superstar. Some kind of evil, compulsion-abusing superstar.” It was an accusation, but his tone and presence radiated the same flirtatiousness she had.

Lissa didn’t know what to say. He was right. Everything he’d said was right. Her compulsion was what had allowed us to dodge authority and get along in the world without adult help. It was what had allowed us to convince the bank to let her tap into her inheritance.

And it was considered every bit as wrong as using magic as a weapon. Why not? It *was* a weapon. A powerful one, one that could be abused very easily. Moroi children had it drilled into them from an early age that compulsion was very, very wrong. No one was taught to use it, though every Moroi technically had the ability. Lissa had just sort of stumbled into it—deeply—and, as Christian had pointed out, she could wield it over Moroi, as well as humans and dhampirs.

“What are you going to do then?” she asked. “You going to turn me in?”

He shook his head and smiled. “No. I think it’s hot.”

She stared, eyes widening and heart racing. Something about the shape of his lips intrigued her. “Rose thinks you’re dangerous,” she blurted out nervously. “She thinks you might have killed the fox.”

I didn’t know how I felt about being dragged into this bizarre conversation. Some people were scared of me. Maybe he was too.

Judging from the amusement in his voice when he spoke, it appeared he wasn’t. “People think I’m unstable, but I tell you, Rose is ten times worse. Of course, that makes it harder for people to fuck with *you*, so I’m all for it.” Leaning back on his heels, he finally broke the intimate space between them. “And I sure as hell didn’t do *that*. Find out who did, though . . . and what I did to Ralf won’t seem like anything.”

His gallant offer of creepy vengeance didn’t exactly reassure Lissa . . . but it did thrill her a little. “I don’t want you doing anything like that. And I still don’t know who did it.”

He leaned back toward her and caught her wrists in his hands. He started to say something, then stopped and looked down in surprise, running his thumbs over faint, barely there scars. Looking back up at her, he had a strange—for him—kindness in his face.

“You might not know who did it. But you know something. Something you aren’t talking about.”

She stared at him, a swirl of emotions playing in her chest. “You can’t know all my secrets,” she murmured.

He glanced back down at her wrists and then released them, that dry smile of his back on his face. “No. I guess not.”

A feeling of peace settled over her, a feeling I thought only I could bring. Returning to my own head and my room, I sat on the floor staring at my math book. Then, for reasons I didn’t really get, I slammed it shut and threw it against the wall.

I spent the rest of the night brooding until the time I was supposed to meet

Jesse came around. Slipping downstairs, I went into the kitchen—a place I could visit so long as I kept things brief—and caught his eye when I cut through the main visiting area.

Moving past him, I paused and whispered, “There’s a lounge on the fourth floor that nobody uses. Take the stairs on the other side of the bathrooms and meet me there in five minutes. The lock on the door is broken.”

He complied to the second, and we found the lounge dark, dusty, and deserted. The drop in guardian numbers over the years meant a lot of the dorm stayed empty, a sad sign for Moroi society but terribly convenient right now.

He sat down on the couch, and I lay back on it, putting my feet in his lap. I was still annoyed after Lissa and Christian’s bizarre attic romance and wanted nothing more than to forget about it for a while.

“You really here to study, or was it just an excuse?” I asked.

“No. It was real. Had to do an assignment with Meredith.” The tone in his voice indicated he wasn’t happy about that.

“Oooh,” I teased. “Is working with a dhampir beneath your royal blood? Should I be offended?”

He smiled, showing a mouth full of perfect white teeth and fangs. “You’re a lot hotter than she is.”

“Glad I make the cut.” There was a sort of a heat in his eyes that was turning me on, as was his hand sliding up my leg. But I needed to do something first. It was time for some vengeance. “Mia must too, since you guys let her hang out with you. She’s not royal.”

His finger playfully poked me in the calf. “She’s with Aaron. And I’ve got lots of friends who aren’t royal. And friends who are dhamps. I’m not a total asshole.”

“Yeah, but did you know her parents are practically custodians for the Drozdovs?”

The hand on my leg stopped. I’d exaggerated, but he was a sucker for gossip—and he was notorious for spreading it.

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. Scrubbing floors and stuff like that.”

“Huh.”

I could see the wheels turning in his dark blue eyes and had to hide a smile. The seed was planted.

Sitting up, I moved closer to him and draped a leg over his lap. I wrapped my arms around him, and without further delay, thoughts of Mia disappeared as his testosterone kicked in. He kissed me eagerly—sloppily, even—pushing me against the back of the couch, and I relaxed into what had to be the first enjoyable physical activity I’d had in weeks.

We kissed like that for a long time, and I didn’t stop him when he pulled off my shirt.

“I’m not having sex,” I warned between kisses. I had no intention of losing my virginity on a couch in a lounge.

He paused, thinking about this, and finally decided not to push it. “Okay.”

But he pushed me onto the couch, lying over me, still kissing with that same fierceness. His lips traveled down to my neck, and when the sharp points of

his fangs brushed against my skin, I couldn't help an excited gasp.

He raised himself up, looking into my face with open surprise. For a moment, I could barely breathe, recalling that rush of pleasure that a vampire bite could fill me with, wondering what it'd be like to feel that while making out. Then the old taboos kicked in. Even if we didn't have sex, giving blood while we did *this* was still wrong, still dirty.

"Don't," I warned.

"You want to." His voice held excited wonder. "I can tell."

"No, I don't."

His eyes lit up. "You do. How—hey, have you done it before?"

"No," I scoffed. "Of course not."

Those gorgeous blue eyes watched me, and I could see the wheels spinning behind them. Jesse might flirt a lot and have a big mouth, but he wasn't stupid.

"You act like you have. You got excited when I was by your neck."

"You're a good kisser," I countered, though it wasn't entirely true. He drooled a little more than I would have preferred. "Don't you think everyone would know if I was giving blood?"

The realization seized him. "Unless you weren't doing it before you left. You did it while you were gone, didn't you? You fed Lissa."

"Of course not," I repeated.

But he was on to something, and he knew it. "It was the only way. You didn't have feeders. Oh, man."

"She found some," I lied. It was the same line we'd fed Natalie, the one she'd spread around and that no one—except Christian—had ever questioned. "Plenty of humans are into it."

"Sure," he said with a smile. He leaned his mouth back to my neck.

"I'm not a blood whore," I snapped, pulling away from him.

"But you *want* to. You like it. All you dhamp girls do." His teeth were on my skin again. Sharp. Wonderful.

I had a feeling hostility would only make things worse, so I defused the situation with teasing. "Stop it," I said gently, running a fingertip over his lips. "I told you, I'm not like that. But if you want something to do with your mouth, I can give you some ideas."

That peaked his interest. "Yeah? Like wha—?"

And that was when the door opened.

We sprang apart. I was ready to handle a fellow student or even possibly the matron. What I was not ready for was Dimitri.

He burst in the door like he'd expected to find us, and in that horrible moment, with him raging like a storm, I knew why Mason had called him a god. In the blink of an eye, he crossed the room and jerked Jesse up by his shirt, nearly holding the Moroi off the ground.

"What's your name?" barked Dimitri.

"J-Jesse, sir. Jesse Zeklos, sir."

"Mr. Zeklos, do you have permission to be in this part of the dorm?"

"No, sir."

"Do you know the rules about male and female interactions around here?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then I suggest you get out of here as fast as you can before I turn you over to someone who will punish you accordingly. If I ever see you like this again"—Dimitri pointed to where I cowered, half-dressed, on the couch—"*I* will be the one to punish you. And it will hurt. A lot. Do you understand?"

Jesse swallowed, eyes wide. None of the bravado he usually showed was there. I guess there was "usually" and then there was being held in the grip of a really ripped, really tall, and really pissed-off Russian guy. "Yes, sir!"

"Then *go*." Dimitri released him, and, if possible, Jesse got out of there faster than Dimitri had burst in. My mentor then turned to me, a dangerous glint in his eyes. He didn't say anything, but the angry, disapproving message came through loud and clear.

And then it shifted.

It was almost like he'd been taken by surprise, like he'd never noticed me before. Had it been any other guy, I would have said he was checking me out. As it was, he was definitely studying me. Studying my face, my body. And I suddenly realized I was only in jeans and a bra—a black bra at that. I knew perfectly well that there weren't a lot of girls at this school who looked as good in a bra as I did. Even a guy like Dimitri, one who seemed so focused on duty and training and all of that, had to appreciate that.

And, finally, I noticed that a hot flush was spreading over me, and that the look in his eyes was doing more to me than Jesse's kisses had. Dimitri was quiet and distant sometimes, but he also had a dedication and an intensity that I'd never seen in any other person. I wondered how that kind of power and strength translated into . . . well, sex. I wondered what it'd be like for him to touch me and—shit!

What was I thinking? Was I out of my mind? Embarrassed, I covered my feelings with attitude.

"You see something you like?" I asked.

"Get dressed."

The set of his mouth hardened, and whatever he'd just felt was gone. That fierceness sobered me up and made me forget about my own troubling reaction. I immediately pulled my shirt back on, uneasy at seeing his badass side.

"How'd you find me? You following me to make sure I don't run away?"

"Be quiet," he snapped, leaning down so that we were at eye level. "A janitor saw you and reported it. Do you have any idea how stupid this was?"

"I know, I know, the whole probation thing, right?"

"Not just that. I'm talking about the stupidity of getting in *that* kind of situation in the first place."

"I get in *that* kind of situation all the time, Comrade. It's not a big deal." Anger replaced my fear. I didn't like being treated like a child.

"Stop calling me that. You don't know even know what you're talking about."

"Sure I do. I had to do a report on Russia and the R.S.S.R. last year."

"*U*.S.S.R. And it *is* a big deal for a Moroi to be with a dhampir girl. They like to brag."

"So?"

"*So*?" he looked disgusted. "So don't you have any respect? Think about

Lissa. You make yourself look cheap. You live up to what a lot of people already think about dhampir girls, and it reflects back on her. And me."

"Oh, I see. Is that what this is about? Am I hurting your big, bad male pride? Are you afraid I'll ruin your reputation?"

"My reputation is already made, Rose. I set my standards and lived up to them long ago. What you do with yours remains to be seen." His voice hardened again. "Now get back to your room—if you can manage it without throwing yourself at someone else."

"Is that your subtle way of calling me a slut?"

"I hear the stories you guys tell. I've heard stories about you."

Ouch. I wanted to yell back that it was none of his business what I did with my body, but something about the anger and disappointment on his face made me falter. I didn't know what it was. "Disappointing" someone like Kirova was a non-event, but Dimitri? . . . I remembered how proud I'd felt when he praised me the last few times in our practices. Seeing that disappear from him . . . well, it suddenly made me feel as cheap as he'd implied I was.

Something broke inside of me. Blinking back tears, I said, "Why is it wrong to . . . I don't know, have fun? I'm seventeen, you know. I should be able to enjoy it."

"You're seventeen, and in less than a year, someone's life and death will be in your hands." His voice still sounded firm, but there was a gentleness there too. "If you were human or Moroi, you could have fun. You could do things other girls could."

"But you're saying I can't."

He glanced away, and his dark eyes went unfocused. He was thinking about something far away from here. "When I was seventeen, I met Ivan Zeklos. We weren't like you and Lissa, but we became friends, and he requested me as his guardian when I graduated. I was the top student in my school. I paid attention to everything in my classes, but in the end, it wasn't enough. That's how it is in this life. One slip, one distraction . . ." He sighed. "And it's too late."

A lump formed in my throat as I thought about one slip or one distraction costing Lissa her life.

"Jesse's a Zeklos," I said, suddenly realizing Dimitri had just thrown around a relative of his former friend and charge.

"I know."

"Does it bother you? Does he remind you of Ivan?"

"It doesn't matter how I feel. It doesn't matter how any of us feel."

"But it does bother you." It suddenly became very obvious to me. I could read his pain, though he clearly worked hard to hide it. "You hurt. Every day. Don't you? You miss him."

Dimitri looked surprised, like he didn't want me to know that, like I'd uncovered some secret part of him. I'd been thinking he was some aloof, antisocial tough guy, but maybe he kept himself apart from other people so he wouldn't get hurt if he lost them. Ivan's death had clearly left a permanent mark.

I wondered if Dimitri was lonely.

The surprised look vanished, and his standard serious one returned. "It

doesn't matter how I feel. *They* come first. Protecting them."

I thought about Lissa again. "Yeah. They do."

A long silence fell before he spoke again.

"You told me you want to fight, to *really* fight. Is that still true?"

"Yes. Absolutely."

"Rose . . . I can teach you, but I have to believe you're dedicated. Really dedicated. I can't have you distracted by things like this." He gestured around the lounge. "Can I trust you?"

Again, I felt like crying under that gaze, under the seriousness of what he asked. I didn't get how he could have such a powerful effect on me. I'd never cared so much about what one person thought. "Yes. I promise."

"All right. I'll teach you, but I need you strong. I know you hate the running, but it really is necessary. You have no idea what Strigoi are like. The school tries to prepare you, but until you've seen how strong they are and how fast . . . well, you can't even imagine. So I can't stop the running and the conditioning. If you want to learn more about fighting, we need to add more trainings. It'll take up more of your time. You won't have much left for your homework or anything else. You'll be tired. A lot."

I thought about it, about him, and about Lissa. "It doesn't matter. If you tell me to do it, I'll do it."

He studied me hard, like he was still trying to decide if he could believe me. Finally satisfied, he gave me a sharp nod. "We'll start tomorrow."

TEN

"EXCUSE ME, MR. NAGY? I CAN'T really concentrate with Lissa and Rose passing notes over there!"

Mia was attempting to distract attention from herself—as well as from her inability to answer Mr. Nagy's question—and it was ruining what had otherwise been a promising day. A few of the fox rumors still circulated, but most people wanted to talk about Christian attacking Ralf. I still hadn't cleared Christian of the fox incident—I was pretty sure he was psycho enough to have done it as some crazy sign of affection for Lissa—but whatever his motives, he had shifted the attention off her, just as he'd said.

Mr. Nagy, legendary for his ability to humiliate students by reading notes aloud, homed in on us like a missile. He snatched the note away, and the excited class settled in for a full reading. I swallowed my groan, trying to look as blank and unconcerned as possible. Beside me, Lissa looked like she wanted to die.

"My, my," he said, looking the note over. "If only students would write this much in their essays. One of you has considerably worse writing than the other, so forgive me if I get anything wrong here." He cleared his throat. "'*So, I saw J last night*,' begins the person with bad handwriting, to which the response is, '*What happened,*' followed by no fewer than five question marks. Understandable, since sometimes one—let alone four—just won't get the point across, eh?" The class laughed, and I noticed Mia throwing me a particularly mean smile. "The first speaker responds: '*What do you think happened? We hooked up in one of the empty lounges.*'"

Mr. Nagy glanced up after hearing some more giggles in the room. His British accent only added to the hilarity.

"May I assume by this reaction that the use of 'hook up' pertains to the more recent, shall we say, *carnal* application of the term than the tamer one I grew up with?"

More snickers ensued. Straightening up, I said boldly, "Yes, sir, Mr. Nagy. That would be correct, sir." A number of people in the class laughed outright.

"Thank you for that confirmation, Miss Hathaway. Now, where was I? Ah yes, the other speaker then asks, '*How was it?*' The response is, '*Good,*' punctuated with a smiley face to confirm said adjective. Well. I suppose kudos are in order for the mysterious J, hmmm? '*So, like, how far did you guys go?*' Uh, ladies," said Mr. Nagy, "I do hope this doesn't surpass a PG rating. '*Not very. We got caught.*' And again, we are shown the severity of the situation, this

time through the use of a not-smiling face. '*What happened?*' '*Dimitri showed up. He threw Jesse out and then bitched me out.*'"

The class lost it, both from hearing Mr. Nagy say "bitched" and from finally getting some participants named.

"Why, Mr. Zeklos, are you the aforementioned J? The one who earned a smiley face from the sloppy writer?" Jesse's face turned beet red, but he didn't look entirely displeased at having his exploits made known in front of his friends. He'd kept what had happened a secret thus far—including the blood talk—because I suspected Dimitri had scared the hell out of him. "Well, while I applaud a good misadventure as much as the next teacher whose time is utterly wasted, do remind your 'friends' in the future that my class is not a chat room." He tossed the paper back on to Lissa's desk. "Miss Hathaway, it seems there's no feasible way to punish you, since you're already maxed out on penalties around here. Ergo, you, Miss Dragomir, will serve two detentions instead of one on behalf of your friend. Stay here when the bell rings, please."

After class, Jesse found me, an uneasy look on his face. "Hey, um, about that note . . . you know I didn't have anything to do with that. If Belikov finds out about it . . . you'll tell him? I mean, you'll let him know I didn't—"

"Yeah, yeah," I interrupted him. "Don't worry, you're safe."

Standing with me, Lissa watched him walk out of the room. Thinking of how easily Dimitri had thrown him around—and of his apparent cowardice—I couldn't help but remark, "You know, Jesse's suddenly not as hot as I used to think."

She only laughed. "You'd better go. I've got desks to wash."

I left her, heading back for my dorm. As I did, I passed a number of students gathered in small clusters outside the building. I regarded them wistfully, wishing I had the free time to socialize.

"No, it's true," I heard a confident voice say. Camille Conta. Beautiful and popular, from one of the most prestigious families in the Conta clan. She and Lissa had sort of been friends before we left, in the uneasy way two powerful forces keep an eye on each other. "They, like, clean toilets or something."

"Oh my God," her friend said. "I'd die if I was Mia."

I smiled. Apparently Jesse had spread some of the stories I'd told him last night. Unfortunately, the next overheard conversation shattered my victory.

"—heard it was still *alive*. Like, twitching on her bed."

"That is so gross. Why would they just leave it there?"

"I don't know. Why kill it in the first place?"

"You think Ralf was right? That she and Rose did it to get kicked—"

They saw me and shut up.

Scowling, I skulked off across the quadrangle. *Still alive, still alive*.

I'd refused to let Lissa talk about the similarities between the fox and what had happened two years ago. I didn't want to believe they were connected, and I certainly didn't want her to either.

But I hadn't been able to stop thinking about that incident, not only because it was chilling, but because it really did remind me of what had just happened in her room.

We had been out in the woods near campus one evening, having skipped out on our last class. I'd traded a pair of cute, rhinestone-studded sandals to

Abby Badica for a bottle of peach schnapps—desperate, yes, but you did what you had to in Montana—which she'd somehow gotten hold of. Lissa had shaken her head in disapproval when I suggested cutting class to go put the bottle out of its misery, but she'd come along anyway. Like always.

We found an old log to sit on near a scummy green marsh. A half-moon cast a tiny sliver of light on us, but it was more than enough for vampires and half-vampires to see by. Passing the bottle back and forth, I grilled her on Aaron. She'd fessed up that the two of them had had sex the weekend before, and I felt a surge of jealousy that she'd been the one to have sex first.

"So what was it like?"

She shrugged and took another drink. "I don't know. It wasn't anything."

"What do you mean it wasn't anything? Didn't the earth move or the planets align or something?"

"No," she said, smothering a laugh. "Of course not."

I didn't really get why that should be funny, but I could tell she didn't want to talk about it. This was around the time the bond had begun forming, and her emotions were starting to creep into me now and then. I held up the bottle and glared at it.

"I don't think this stuff is working."

"That's because there's barely any alcohol in—"

The sound of something moving in the brush came from nearby. I immediately shot up, putting my body between her and the noise.

"It's some animal," she said when a minute went by in silence.

That didn't mean it wasn't dangerous. The school's wards kept out Strigoi, but wild animals often wandered into the outskirts of campus, posing their own threats. Bears. Cougars.

"Come on," I told her. "Let's head back."

We hadn't gone very far when I heard something moving again, and someone stepped out into our path. "Ladies."

Ms. Karp.

We froze, and whatever quick reactions I'd shown back by the marsh disappeared as I delayed a few moments in hiding the bottle behind my back.

A half-smile crossed her face, and she held out her hand.

Sheepishly, I gave the bottle to her, and she tucked it under her arm. She turned without another word, and we followed, knowing there would be consequences to deal with.

"You think no one notices when half a class is gone?" she asked after a little while.

"Half a class?"

"A few of you apparently chose today to skip. Must be the nice weather. Spring fever."

Lissa and I trudged along. I'd never been comfortable around Ms. Karp since the time she'd healed my hands. Her weird, paranoid behavior had taken on a strange quality to me—a lot stranger than before. Scary, even. And lately I couldn't look at her without seeing those marks by her forehead. Her deep red hair usually covered them but not always. Sometimes there were new marks; sometimes the old ones faded to nothing.

A weird fluttering noise sounded to my right. We all stopped.

“One of your classmates, I imagine,” murmured Ms. Karp, turning toward the sound.

But when we reached the spot, we found a large black bird lying on the ground. Birds—and most animals—didn’t do anything for me, but even I had to admire its sleek feathers and fierce beak. It could probably peck someone’s eyes out in thirty seconds—if it weren’t obviously dying. With a last, half-hearted shake, the bird finally went still.

“What is that? Is it a crow?” I asked.

“Too big,” said Ms. Karp. “It’s a raven.”

“Is it dead?” asked Lissa.

I peered at it. “Yeah. Definitely dead. Don’t touch it.”

“Probably attacked by another bird,” observed Ms. Karp. “They fight over territory and resources sometimes.”

Lissa knelt down, compassion on her face. I wasn’t surprised, since she’d always had a thing for animals. She’d lectured me for days after I’d instigated the infamous hamster-and-hermit-crab fight. I’d viewed the fight as a testing of worthy opponents. She’d seen it as animal cruelty.

Transfixed, she reached toward the raven.

“Liss!” I exclaimed, horrified. “It’s probably got a disease.”

But her hand moved out like she hadn’t even heard me. Ms. Karp stood there like a statue, her white face looking like a ghost’s. Lissa’s fingers stroked the raven’s wings.

“Liss,” I repeated, starting to move toward her, to pull her back. Suddenly, a strange sensation flooded through my head, a sweetness that was beautiful and full of life. The feeling was so intense, it stopped me in my tracks.

Then the raven moved.

Lissa gave a small scream and snatched her hand back. We both stared wide-eyed.

The raven flapped its wings, slowly trying to right itself and stand up. When it managed to do so, it turned toward us, fixing Lissa with a look that seemed too intelligent for a bird. Its eyes held hers, and I couldn’t read her reaction through the bond. At long last, the raven broke the gaze and lifted into the air, strong wings carrying it away.

Wind stirring the leaves was the only sound left.

“Oh my God,” breathed Lissa. “What just happened?”

“Hell if I know,” I said, hiding my stark terror.

Ms. Karp strode forward and grabbed Lissa’s arm, forcefully turning her so that they faced each other. I was there in a flash, ready to take action if Crazy Karp tried anything, though even I had qualms about taking down a teacher.

“Nothing happened,” said Ms. Karp in an urgent voice, her eyes wild-looking. “Do you hear me? Nothing. And you can’t tell anyone—*anyone*—about what you saw. Both of you. Promise me. Promise me you won’t ever talk about this again.”

Lissa and I exchanged uneasy glances. “Okay,” she croaked out.

Ms. Karp’s grip relaxed a little. “And don’t ever do it again. If you do, they’ll find out. They’ll try to find you.” She turned to me. “You can’t let her do it. Not ever again.”

On the quad, outside my dorm, someone was saying my name.

“Hey, Rose? I’ve called you, like, a hundred times.”

I forgot about Ms. Karp and the raven and glanced over at Mason, who had apparently started walking with me toward the dorm while I was off in la-la land.

“Sorry,” I mumbled. “I’m out of it. Just . . . um, tired.”

“Too much excitement last night?”

I gave him a narrow-eyed look. “Nothing I couldn’t handle.”

“I guess,” he laughed, though he didn’t exactly sound amused. “Sounds like Jesse couldn’t handle it.”

“He did okay.”

“If you say so. But personally, I think you’ve got bad taste.”

I stopped walking. “And *I* don’t think it’s any of your business.”

He looked away angrily. “You made it the whole class’s business.”

“Hey, I didn’t do that on purpose.”

“Would’ve happened anyway. Jesse’s got a big mouth.”

“He wouldn’t have told.”

“Yeah,” said Mason. “Because he’s so cute and has such an important family.”

“Stop being an idiot,” I snapped. “And why do you even care? Jealous I’m not doing it with you?”

His flush grew, going all the way to the roots of his red hair. “I just don’t like hearing people talk shit about you, that’s all. There are a lot of nasty jokes going around. They’re calling you a slut.”

“I don’t care what they call me.”

“Oh, yeah. You’re really tough. You don’t need anyone.”

I stopped. “I don’t. I’m one of the best novices in this fucking place. I don’t need you acting all gallant and coming to my defense. Don’t treat me like I’m some helpless girl.”

I turned around and kept walking, but he caught up to me easily. The woes of being five-seven.

“Look . . . I didn’t mean to upset you. I’m just worried about you.”

I gave a harsh laugh.

“I’m serious. Wait . . .” he began. “I, uh, did something for you. Sort of. I went to the library last night and tried to look up St. Vladimir.”

I stopped again. “You did?”

“Yeah, but there wasn’t much on Anna. All the books were kind of generic. Just talked about him healing people, bringing them back from the edge of death.”

That last part hit a nerve.

“Was . . . was there anything else?” I stammered.

He shook his head. “No. You probably need some primary sources, but we don’t have any here.”

“Primary what?”

He scoffed, a smile breaking over his face. “Do you do anything but pass notes? We just talked about them the other day in Andrews’ class. They’re books from the actual time period you want to study. Secondary ones are written by people living today. You’ll get better information if you find something written by the guy himself. Or someone who actually knew him.”

“Huh. Okay. What are you, like, a boy genius now?”

Mason gave me a light punch in the arm. “I pay attention, that’s all. You’re so oblivious. You miss all sorts of things.” He smiled nervously. “And look . . . I really am sorry about what I said. I was just—”

Jealous, I realized. I could see it in his eyes. How had I never noticed this before? He was crazy about me. I guess I really was oblivious.

“It’s all right, Mase. Forget about it.” I smiled. “And thanks for looking that stuff up.”

He smiled back, and I went inside, sad that I didn’t feel the same way about him.

ELEVEN

"YOU NEED SOMETHING TO WEAR?" Lissa asked.

"Hmm?"

I glanced over at her. We were waiting for Mr. Nagy's Slavic art class to start, and I was preoccupied with listening to Mia adamantly deny the claims about her parents to one of her friends.

"It's not like they're servants or anything," she exclaimed, clearly flustered. Straightening her face, she tried for haughtiness. "They're practically advisors. The Drozdovs don't decide *anything* without them."

I choked on a laugh, and Lissa shook her head.

"You're enjoying this way too much."

"Because it's awesome. What'd you just ask me?" I dug through my bag, messily looking for my lip gloss. I made a face when I found it. It was almost empty; I didn't know where I was going to score some more.

"I asked if you need something to wear tonight," she said.

"Well, *yeah*, of course I do. But none of your stuff fits me."

"What are you going to do?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "Improvise, like always. I don't really care anyway. I'm just glad Kirova's letting me go."

We had an assembly tonight. It was November 1, All Saints' Day—which also meant we'd been back almost a month now. A royal group was visiting the school, including Queen Tatiana herself. Honestly, that wasn't what excited me. She'd visited the Academy before. It was pretty common and a lot less cool than it sounded. Besides, after living among humans and elected leaders, I didn't think much of stiff royals. Still, I'd gotten permission to go because everyone else would be there. It was a chance to hang out with actual people for a change and not stay locked in my dorm room. A little freedom was definitely worth the pain of sitting through a few boring speeches.

I didn't stay to chat with Lissa after school like I usually did. Dimitri had stuck to his promise about extra trainings, and I was trying to stick to mine. I now had two additional hours of practice with him, one before *and* one after school. The more I watched him in action, the more I understood the badass-god reputation. He clearly knew a lot—his six *molnija* marks proved as much—and I burned to have him teach me what he knew.

When I arrived at the gym, I noticed he was wearing a T-shirt and loose running pants, as opposed to his usual jeans. It was a good look for him. Really good. *Stop looking,* I immediately told myself.

He positioned me so that we stood facing each other on the mat and crossed his arms. “What’s the first problem you’ll run into when facing a Strigoi?”

“They’re immortal?”

“Think of something more basic.”

More basic than that? I considered. “They could be bigger than me. And stronger.”

Most Strigoi—unless they’d been human first—had the same height as their Moroi cousins. Strigoi also had better strength, reflexes, and senses than dhampirs. That’s why guardians trained so hard; we had a “learning curve” to compensate for.

Dimitri nodded. “That makes it difficult but not impossible. You can usually use a person’s extra height and weight against them.”

He turned and demonstrated several maneuvers, pointing out where to move and how to strike someone. Going through the motions with him, I gained some insight into why I took such a regular beating in group practice. I absorbed his techniques quickly and couldn’t wait to actually use them. Near the end of our time together, he let me try.

“Go ahead,” he said. “Try to hit me.”

I didn’t need to be told twice. Lunging forward, I tried to land a blow and was promptly blocked and knocked down onto the mat. Pain surged through my body, but I refused to give in to it. I jumped up again, hoping to catch him off guard. I didn’t.

After several more failed attempts, I stood up and held out my hands in a gesture of truce. “Okay, what am I doing wrong?”

“Nothing.”

I wasn’t as convinced. “If I wasn’t doing anything wrong, I’d have rendered you unconscious by now.”

“Unlikely. Your moves are all correct, but this is the first time you’ve really tried. I’ve done it for years.”

I shook my head and rolled my eyes at his older-and-wiser manner. He’d once told me he was twenty-four. “Whatever you say, Grandpa. Can we try it again?”

“We’re out of time. Don’t you want to get ready?”

I looked at the dusty clock on the wall and perked up. Almost time for the banquet. The thought made me giddy. I felt like Cinderella, but without the clothes.

“Hell, yeah, I do.”

He walked off ahead of me. Studying him carefully, I realized I couldn’t let the opportunity go by. I leapt at his back, positioning myself exactly the way he’d taught me. I had the element of surprise. Everything was perfect, and he wouldn’t even see me coming.

Before I could make contact, he spun around at a ridiculously high speed. In one deft motion, he grabbed me like I weighed nothing and threw me to the ground, pinning me there.

I groaned. “I didn’t do anything wrong!”

His eyes looked levelly into mine as he held my wrists, but he didn’t look as serious as he had during the lesson. He seemed to find this funny. “The battle cry sort of gave you away. Try not to yell next time.”

"Would it have really made a difference if I'd been quiet?"

He thought about it. "No. Probably not."

I sighed loudly, still in too much of a good mood to really let this disappointment get me down. There were some advantages to having such a kick-ass mentor—one who also happened to have a foot of height on me and outweighed me considerably. And that wasn't even considering his strength. He wasn't bulky, but his body had a lot of hard, lean muscle. If I could ever beat *him*, I could beat anyone.

All of a sudden, it occurred to me that he was still holding me down. The skin on his fingers was warm as he clutched my wrists. His face hovered inches from my own, and his legs and torso were actually pressing against mine. Some of his long brown hair hung around his face, and he appeared to be noticing me too, almost like he had that night in the lounge. And oh *God*, did he smell good. Breathing became difficult for me, and it had nothing to do with the workout or my lungs being crushed.

I would have given anything to be able to read his mind right then. Ever since that night in the lounge, I'd noticed him watching me with this same, studious expression. He never actually did it during the trainings themselves—those were *business*. But before and after, he would sometimes lighten up just a little, and I'd see him look at me in a way that was almost admiring. And sometimes, if I was really, really lucky, he'd smile at me. A real smile, too—not the dry one that accompanied the sarcasm we tossed around so often. I didn't want to admit it to anyone—not to Lissa, not even to myself— but some days, I lived for those smiles. They lit up his face. "Gorgeous" no longer adequately described him.

Hoping to appear calm, I tried to think of something professional and guardian-related to say. Instead, I said, "So um . . . you got any other moves to show me?"

His lips twitched, and for a moment, I thought I was going to get one of those smiles. My heart leapt. Then, with visible effort, he pushed the smile back and once more became my tough-love mentor. He shifted off me, leaned back on his heels, and rose. "Come on. We should go."

I scrambled to my own feet and followed him out of the gym. He didn't look back as he walked, and I mentally kicked myself on the way back to my room.

I was crushing on my mentor. Crushing on my *older* mentor. I had to be out of my mind. He was seven years older than me. Old enough to be my . . . well, okay, nothing. But still older than me. Seven years was a lot. He'd been learning to write when I was born. When I'd been learning to write and throw books at my teachers, he'd probably been kissing girls. Probably lots of girls, considering how he looked.

I *so* did not need this complication in my life right now.

I found a passable sweater back in my room and after a quick shower, I headed off across campus to the reception.

Despite the looming stone walls, fancy statues, and turrets on the outsides of the buildings, the Academy's insides were quite modern. We had Wi-Fi, fluorescent lights, and just about anything else technological you could imagine. The commons in particular looked pretty much like the cafeterias I'd eaten in while in Portland and Chicago, with simple rectangular tables,

soothing taupe walls, and a little room off to the side where our dubiously prepared meals were served. Someone had at least hung framed black-and-white photos along the walls in an effort to decorate it, but I didn't really consider pictures of vases and leafless trees "art."

Tonight, however, someone had managed to transform the normally boring commons into a bona fide dining room. Vases spilling over with crimson roses and delicate white lilies. Glowing candles. Tablecloths made of—wait for it—bloodred linen. The effect was gorgeous. It was hard to believe this was the same place I usually ate chicken patty sandwiches in. It looked fit for, well, a queen.

The tables had been arranged in straight lines, creating an aisle down the middle of the room. We had assigned seating, and naturally, I couldn't sit anywhere near Lissa. She sat in the front with the other Moroi; I was in the back with the novices. But she did catch my eye when I entered and flashed me a smile. She'd borrowed a dress from Natalie—blue, silky, and strapless—that looked amazing with her pale features. Who'd known Natalie owned anything so good? It made my sweater lose a few cool points.

They always conducted these formal banquets in the same way. A head table sat on a dais at the front of the room, where we could all ooh and ahh and watch Queen Tatiana and other royals eat dinner. Guardians lined the walls, as stiff and formal as statues. Dimitri stood among them, and a weird feeling twisted my stomach as I recalled what had happened in the gym. His eyes stared straight ahead, as if focusing on nothing and everything in the room at once.

When the time came for the royals' entrance, we all stood up respectfully and watched as they walked down the aisle. I recognized a few, mostly those who had children attending the Academy. Victor Dashkov was among them, walking slowly and with a cane. While I was happy to see him, I cringed to watch each agonizing step he took toward the front of the room.

Once that group had passed, four solemn guardians with red-and-black-pin-striped jackets entered the commons. Everyone but the guardians along the walls sank to our knees in a silly show of loyalty.

What a lot of ceremony and posturing, I thought wearily. Moroi monarchs were chosen by the previous monarch from within the royal families. The king or queen couldn't choose one of his or her own direct descendents, and a council from the noble and royal families could dispute the choice with enough cause. That almost never happened, though.

Queen Tatiana followed her guards, wearing a red silk dress and matching jacket. She was in her early sixties and had dark gray hair bobbed to her chin and crowned with a Miss America-type tiara. She moved into the room slowly, like she was taking a stroll, four more guardians at her back.

She moved through the novices' section fairly quickly, though she did nod and smile here and there. Dhampirs might just be the half-human, illegitimate children of the Moroi, but we trained and dedicated our lives to serving and protecting them. The likelihood was strong that many of us gathered here would die young, and the queen had to show her respect for that.

When she got to the Moroi section, she paused longer and actually spoke to a few students. It was a big deal to be acknowledged, mostly a sign that

someone's parents had gotten in good with her. Naturally, the royals got the most attention. She didn't really say much to them that was all that interesting, mostly just a lot of fancy words.

"Vasilisa Dragomir."

My head shot up. Alarm coursed through the bond at the sound of her name. Breaking protocol, I pushed out of my position and wiggled over to get a better view, knowing no one would notice me when the queen herself had personally singled out the last of the Dragomirs. Everyone was eager to see what the monarch had to say to Lissa the runaway princess.

"We heard you had returned. We are glad to have the Dragomirs back, even though only one remains. We deeply regret the loss of your parents and your brother; they were among the finest of the Moroi, their deaths a true tragedy."

I'd never really understood the royal "we" thing, but otherwise, everything sounded okay.

"You have an interesting name," she continued. "Many heroines in Russian fairy tales are named Vasilisa. Vasilisa the Brave, Vasilisa the Beautiful. They are different young women, all having the same name and the same excellent qualities: strength, intelligence, discipline, and virtue. All accomplish great things, triumphing over their adversaries.

"Likewise, the Dragomir name commands its own respect. Dragomir kings and queens have ruled wisely and justly in our history. They have used their powers for miraculous ends. They have slain Strigoi, fighting right alongside their guardians. They are *royal* for a reason."

She waited a moment, letting the weight of her words sink in. I could feel the mood changing in the room, as well as the surprise and shy pleasure creeping out from Lissa. This would shake the social balance. We could probably expect a few wannabes trying to get in good with Lissa tomorrow.

"Yes," Tatiana continued, "you are doubly named with power. Your names represent the finest qualities people have to offer and hearken back in time to deeds of greatness and valor." She paused a moment. "But, as you have demonstrated, names do *not* make a person. Nor do they have any bearing on how that person turns out."

And with that verbal slap in the face, she turned away and continued her procession.

A collective shock filled the room. I briefly contemplated and then dismissed any attempts at jumping into the aisle and tackling the queen. Half a dozen guardians would have me down on the floor before I'd even taken five steps. So I sat impatiently through dinner, all the while feeling Lissa's absolute mortification.

When the post-dinner reception followed, Lissa made a beeline for the doors leading out to the courtyard. I followed, but got delayed having to weave around and avoid the mingling, socializing people.

She'd wandered outside to an adjacent courtyard, one that matched the Academy's grand external style. A roof of carved, twisting wood covered the garden, with little holes here and there to let in some light, but not enough to cause damage to Moroi. Trees, leaves now gone for the winter, lined the area and guarded paths leading out to other gardens, courtyards, and the main quadrangle. A pond, also emptied for the winter, lay in a corner, and standing

over it was an imposing statue of St. Vladimir himself. Carved of gray rock, he wore long robes and had a beard and mustache.

Rounding a corner, I stopped when I saw Natalie had beaten me to Lissa. I considered interrupting but stepped back before they could see me. Spying might be bad, but I was suddenly very curious to hear what Natalie had to say to Lissa.

"She shouldn't have said that," Natalie said. She wore a yellow dress similar in cut to Lissa's, but somehow lacked the grace and poise to make it look as good. Yellow was also a terrible color on her. It clashed with her black hair, which she'd put up into an off-center bun. "It wasn't right," she went on. "Don't let it bother you."

"Kind of late for that." Lissa's eyes were locked firmly on the stone walkway below.

"She was wrong."

"She's *right*," Lissa exclaimed. "My parents . . . and Andre ... they would have hated me for what I did."

"No, they wouldn't have." Natalie spoke in a gentle voice.

"It was stupid to run away. Irresponsible."

"So what? You made a mistake. I make mistakes all the time. The other day, I was doing this assignment in science, and it was for chapter ten, and I'd actually read chapter elev—" Natalie stopped herself and, in a remarkable show of restraint, got herself back on track. "People change. We're always changing, right? You aren't the same as you were then. I'm not the same as I was then."

Actually, Natalie seemed *exactly* the same to me, but that didn't bother me so much anymore. She'd grown on me.

"Besides," she added, "was running away really a mistake? You must have done it for a reason. You must have gotten something out of it, right? There was a lot of bad stuff going on with you, wasn't there? With your parents and your brother. I mean, maybe it was the right thing to do."

Lissa hid a smile. Both of us were pretty sure Natalie was trying to find out why we had left—just like everyone else in the school. She sort of sucked at being sneaky.

"I don't know if it was, no," Lissa answered. "I was weak. Andre wouldn't have run away. He was so good. Good at everything. Good at getting along with people and all that royal crap."

"You're good at that too."

"I guess. But I don't like it. I mean, I like people . . . but most of what they do is so fake. That's what I don't like."

"Then don't feel bad about not getting involved," Natalie said. I don't hang out with all those people either, and look at *me*. I'm just fine. Daddy says he doesn't care if I hang out with the royals or not. He just wants me to be happy."

"And that," I said, finally making my appearance, "is why *he* should be ruling instead of that bitch of a queen. He got robbed."

Natalie nearly jumped ten feet. I felt pretty confident her vocabulary of swear words mostly consisted of "golly" and "darn."

"I wondered where you were," said Lissa.

Natalie looked back and forth between us, suddenly seeming a little embarrassed to be right between the best-friends dream team. She shifted uncomfortably and tucked some messy hair behind her ear. “Well . . . I should go find Daddy. I’ll see you back in the room.”

“See you,” said Lissa. “And thanks.”

Natalie hurried off.

“Does she really call him ‘*Daddy*’?”

Lissa cut me a look. “Leave her alone. She’s nice.”

“She is, actually. I heard what she said, and as much as I hate to admit it, there was nothing there I could really make fun of. It was all true.” I paused. “I’ll kill her, you know. The queen, not Natalie. Screw the guardians. I’ll do it. She can’t get away with that.”

“God, Rose! Don’t say that. They’ll arrest you for treason. Just let it go.”

“Let it go? After what she said to you? In front of everyone?”

She didn’t answer or even look at me. Instead, she toyed absentmindedly with the branches of a scraggly bush that had gone dormant for the winter. There was a vulnerable look about her that I recognized—and feared.

“Hey.” I lowered my voice. “Don’t look like that. She doesn’t know what she’s talking about, okay? Don’t let this get you down. Don’t do anything you shouldn’t.”

She glanced back up at me. “It’s going to happen again, isn’t it?” she whispered. Her hand, still clutching the tree, began to tremble.

“Not if you don’t let it.” I tried to look at her wrists without being too obvious. “You haven’t? . . .”

“No.” She shook her head and blinked back tears. “I haven’t wanted to. I was upset after the fox, but it’s been okay. I like the coasting thing. I miss seeing you, but everything’s been all right. I like . . .” She paused.

I could hear the word forming in her mind.

“Christian.”

“I wish you couldn’t do that. Or wouldn’t.”

“Sorry. Do I need to give you the Christian’s-a-psychopathic-loser talk again?”

“I think I’ve got it memorized after the last ten times,” she muttered.

I started to launch into number eleven when I heard the sound of laughter and the clatter of high heels on stone. Mia walked toward us with a few friends in tow but no Aaron. Immediately, my defenses snapped on.

Internally, Lissa was still shaken over the queen’s comments. Sorrow and humiliation were swirling inside of her. She felt embarrassed over what others must think of her now and kept thinking about how her family would have hated her for running away. I didn’t believe that, but it felt real to her, and her dark emotions churned and churned. She was *not* okay, no matter how casual she’d just tried to act, and I was worried she might do something reckless. Mia was the last person she needed to see right now.

“What do you want?” I demanded.

Mia smiled haughtily at Lissa and ignored me, taking a few steps forward. “Just wanted to know what it’s like to be *so* important and *so* royal. You must be so excited that the queen talked to you.” Giggles surfaced from the gathering group.

"You're standing too close." I stepped between them, and Mia flinched a little, possibly still worried I might break her arm. "And hey, at least the queen knew her name, which is more than I can say for you and your wannabe-royal act. *Or* your parents."

I could see the pain that caused her. Man, she wanted to be royal so badly. "At least I *see* my parents," she retorted. "At least I know who they both are. God only knows who your father is. And your mom's one of the most famous guardians around, but she couldn't care less about you either. Everyone knows she never visits. Probably was glad when you were gone. If she even *noticed*."

That hurt. I clenched my teeth. "Yeah, well, at least she's famous. She really does advise royals and nobles. She doesn't clean up after them."

I heard one of her friends snicker behind her. Mia opened her mouth, no doubt to unleash one of the many retorts she'd had to accumulate since the story started going around, when the lightbulb suddenly went off in her head.

"It was *you*," she said, eyes wide. "Someone told me Jesse'd started it, but he couldn't have known anything about me. He got it from you. When you *slept* with him."

Now she was really starting to piss me off. "I didn't sleep with him."

Mia pointed at Lissa and glared back at me. "So that's it, huh? You do her dirty work because she's too pathetic to do it herself. You aren't always going to be able to protect her," she warned. "*You* aren't safe either."

Empty threats. I leaned forward, making my voice as menacing as possible. In my current mood, it wasn't difficult. "Yeah? Try and touch me now and find out."

I hoped she would. I wanted her to. We didn't need her messed-up vendetta in our lives just now. She was a distraction—one I very much wanted to punch right now.

Looking past her, I saw Dimitri move out into the garden, eyes searching for something—or someone. I had a pretty good idea who it was. When he saw me, he strode forward, shifting his attention when he noticed the crowd gathered around us. Guardians can smell a fight a mile away. Of course, a six-year-old could have smelled this fight.

Dimitri stood beside me and crossed his arms. "Everything all right?"

"Sure thing, Guardian Belikov." I smiled as I said it, but I was furious. Raging, even. This whole Mia confrontation had only made Lissa feel worse. "We were just swapping family stories. Ever heard Mia's? It's *fascinating*."

"Come on," said Mia to her followers. She led them off, but not before she'd given me one last, chilling look. I didn't need to read her mind to know what it said. This wasn't over. She was going to try to get one or both of us back. Fine. Bring it on, Mia.

"I'm supposed to take you back to your dorm," Dimitri told me drily. "You weren't about to just start a fight, were you?"

"Of course not," I said, my eyes still staring at the empty doorway Mia had disappeared through. "I don't start fights where people can see them."

"Rose," groaned Lissa.

"Let's go. Good night, Princess."

He turned, but I didn't move. "You going to be okay, Liss?"

She nodded. "I'm fine."

It was such a lie, I couldn't believe she had the nerve to try to put it past me. I didn't need the bond to see tears shining in her eyes. We should never have come back to this place, I realized bleakly.

"Liss ..."

She gave me a small, sad smile and nodded in Dimitri's direction. "I told you, I'm fine. You've got to go."

Reluctantly, I followed him. He led me out toward the other side of the garden. "We may need to add an extra training on self-control," he noted.

"I have plenty of self contr—hey!"

I stopped talking as I saw Christian slip past us, moving down the path we'd just come from. I hadn't seen him at the reception, but if Kirova had released me to come tonight, I suppose she would have done the same for him.

"You going to see Lissa?" I demanded, shifting my Mia rage to him.

He stuffed his hands into his pockets and gave me that look of bad-boy indifference. "What if I am?"

"Rose, this isn't the time," said Dimitri.

But it was *so* the time. Lissa had ignored my warnings about Christian for weeks. It was time to go to the source and stop their ridiculous flirtation once and for all.

"Why don't you just leave her alone? Are you so messed up and desperate for attention that you can't tell when someone doesn't like you?" He scowled. "You're some crazy stalker, and she knows it. She's told me all about your weird obsession—how you're always hanging out in the attic together, how you set Ralf on fire to impress her. She thinks you're a freak, but she's too nice to say anything."

His face had paled, and something dark churned in his eyes. "But *you* aren't too nice?"

"No. Not when I feel sorry for someone."

"Enough," said Dimitri, steering me away.

"Thanks for 'helping,' then," snapped Christian, his voice dripping with animosity.

"No problem," I called back over my shoulder.

When we'd gone a little ways, I stole a glance behind me and saw Christian standing just outside the garden. He'd stopped walking and now stood staring down the path that led to Lissa in the courtyard. Shadows covered his face as he thought, and then, after a few moments, he turned around and headed back toward the Moroi dorms.

TWELVE

SLEEP CAME RELUCTANTLY THAT NIGHT, and I tossed and turned for a long time before finally going under.

An hour or so later, I sat up in bed, trying to relax and sort out the emotions coming to me. Lissa. Scared and upset. Unstable. The night's events suddenly came rushing back to me as I went through what could be bothering her. The queen humiliating her. Mia. Maybe even Christian—he could have found her for all I knew.

Yet . . . none of those was the problem right now. Buried within her, there was something else. Something terribly wrong.

I climbed out of bed, dressed hastily, and considered my options. I had a third-floor room now—way too high to climb down from, particularly since I had no Ms. Karp to patch me up this time. I would never be able to sneak out of the main hall. That only left going through the "appropriate" channels.

"Where do you think you're going?"

One of the matrons who supervised my hall looked up from her chair. She sat stationed at the end of the hall, near the stairs going down. During the day, that stairwell had loose supervision. At night, we might as well have been in jail.

I crossed my arms. "I need to see Dim—Guardian Belikov."

"It's late."

"It's an emergency."

She looked me up and down. "You seem okay to me."

"You're going to be in so much trouble tomorrow when everyone finds out you stopped me from reporting what I know."

"Tell me."

"It's private guardian stuff."

I gave her as hard a stare as I could manage. It must have worked, because she finally stood up and pulled out a cell phone. She called someone—Dimitri, I hoped—but murmured too low for me to hear. We waited several minutes, and then the door leading to the stairs opened. Dimitri appeared, fully dressed and alert, though I felt pretty sure we'd pulled him out of bed.

He took one look at me. "Lissa."

I nodded.

Without another word, he turned around and started back down the stairs. I followed. We walked across the quad in silence, toward the imposing Moroi dorm. It was "night" for the vampires, which meant it was daytime for the rest

of the world. Mid-afternoon sun shone with a cold, golden light on us. The human genes in me welcomed it and always sort of regretted how Moroi light sensitivity forced us to live in darkness most of the time.

Lissa's hall matron gaped when we appeared, but Dimitri was too intimidating to oppose. "She's in the bathroom," I told them. When the matron started to follow me inside, I wouldn't let her. "She's too upset. Let me talk to her alone first."

Dimitri considered. "Yes. Give them a minute."

I pushed the door open.

"Liss?"

A soft sound, like a sob, came from within. I walked down five stalls and found the only one closed. I knocked softly.

"Let me in," I said, hoping I sounded calm and strong.

I heard a sniffle, and a few moments later, the door unlatched. I wasn't prepared for what I saw. Lissa stood before me . . .

... covered in blood.

Horrified, I squelched a scream and almost called for help. Looking more closely, I saw that a lot of the blood wasn't actually coming from her. It was smeared on her, like it had been on her hands and she'd rubbed her face. She sank to the floor, and I followed, kneeling before her.

"Are you okay?" I whispered. "What happened?"

She only shook her head, but I saw her face crumple as more tears spilled from her eyes. I took her hands.

"Come on. Let's get you cleaned—"

I stopped. She *was* bleeding after all. Perfect lines crossed her wrists, not near any crucial veins, but enough to leave wet, red tracks across her skin. She hadn't hit her veins when she did this; death hadn't been her goal. She met my eyes.

"I'm sorry. . . . I didn't mean . . . Please don't let them know . . ." she sobbed. "When I saw *it*, I freaked out." She nodded toward her wrists. "This just happened before I could stop. I was upset. . . ."

"It's okay," I said automatically, wondering what "it" was. "Come on."

I heard a knock on the door. "Rose?"

"Just a sec," I called back.

I took her to the sink and rinsed the blood off her wrists. Grabbing the first-aid kit, I hastily put some Band-Aids on the cuts. The bleeding had already slowed.

"We're coming in," the matron called.

I jerked off my hoodie sweatshirt and quickly handed it to Lissa. She had just pulled it on when Dimitri and the matron entered. He raced to our sides in an instant, and I realized that in hiding Lissa's wrists, I'd forgotten the blood on her face.

"It's not mine," she said quickly, seeing his expression. "It . . . it's the rabbit. . . ."

Dimitri assessed her, and I hoped he wouldn't look at her wrists. When he seemed satisfied she had no gaping wounds, he asked, "What rabbit?" I was wondering the same thing.

With shaking hands, she pointed at the trash can. "I cleaned it up. So

Natalie wouldn't see."

Dimitri and I both walked over and peered into the can. I pulled myself away immediately, swallowing back my stomach's need to throw up. I don't know how Lissa knew it was a rabbit. All I could see was blood. Blood and blood-soaked paper towels. Globs of gore I couldn't identify. The smell was horrible.

Dimitri shifted closer to Lissa, bending down until they were at eye level. "Tell me what happened." He handed her several tissues.

"I came back about an hour ago. And it was there. Right there in the middle of the floor. Torn apart. It was like it had ... exploded." She sniffed. "I didn't want Natalie to find it, didn't want to scare her . . . so I—I cleaned it up. Then I just couldn't . . . I couldn't go back. . . ." She began to cry, and her shoulders shook.

I could figure out the rest, the part she didn't tell Dimitri. She'd found the rabbit, cleaned up, and freaked out. Then she'd cut herself, but it was the weird way she coped with things that upset her.

"No one should be able to get into those rooms!" exclaimed the matron. "How is this happening?"

"Do you know who did it?" Dimitri's voice was gentle.

Lissa reached into her pajama pocket and pulled out a crumpled piece of paper. It had so much blood soaked into it, I could barely read it as he held it and smoothed it out.

I know what you are. You won't survive being here. I'll make sure of it. Leave now. It's the only way you might live through this.

The matron's shock transformed into something more determined, and she headed for the door. "I'm getting Ellen." It took me a second to remember that was Kirova's first name.

"Tell her we'll be at the clinic," said Dimitri. When she left, he turned to Lissa. "You should lie down."

When she didn't move, I linked my arm through hers. "Come on, Liss. Let's get you out of here."

Slowly, she put one foot in front of the other and let us lead her to the Academy's medical clinic. It was normally staffed by a couple of doctors, but at this time of night, only a nurse stayed on duty. She offered to wake one of the doctors, but Dimitri declined. "She just needs to rest."

Lissa had no sooner stretched out on a narrow bed than Kirova and a few others showed up and started questioning her.

I thrust myself in front of them, blocking her. "Leave her alone! Can't you see she doesn't want to talk about it? Let her get some sleep first!"

"Miss Hathaway," declared Kirova, "you're out of line as usual. I don't even know what you're doing here."

Dimitri asked if he could speak with her privately and led her into the hall. I heard angry whispers from her, calm and firm ones from him. When they returned, she said stiffly, "You may stay with her for a little while. We'll have janitors do further cleaning and investigation in the bathroom and your room, Miss Dragomir, and then discuss the situation in detail in the morning."

"Don't wake Natalie," whispered Lissa. "I don't want to scare her. I cleaned up everything in the room anyway."

Kirova looked doubtful. The group retreated but not before the nurse asked if Lissa wanted anything to eat or drink. She declined. Once we were alone, I lay down beside her and put my arm around her.

"I won't let them find out," I told her, sensing her worry about her wrists. "But I wish you'd told me before I left the reception. You'd said you'd always come to me first."

"I wasn't going to do it then," she said, her eyes staring blankly off. "I swear, I wasn't going to. I mean, I was upset ... but I thought ... I thought I could handle it. I was trying so hard . . . really, Rose. I was. But then I got back to my room, and I saw *it*, and I . . . just lost it. It was like the last straw, you know? And I knew I had to clean it up. Had to clean it up before they saw, before they found out, but there was so much blood . . . and afterward, after it was done, it was too much, and I felt like I was going to . . . I don't know . . . explode, and it was just too much, I had to let it out, you know? I had to—"

I interrupted her hysteria. "It's okay, I understand."

That was a lie. I didn't get her cutting at all. She'd done it sporadically, ever since the accident, and it scared me each time. She'd try to explain it to me, how she didn't want to die—she just needed to get *it* out somehow. She felt so much emotionally, she would say, that a physical outlet—physical pain—was the only way to make the internal pain go away. It was the only way she could control it.

"Why is this happening?" she cried into her pillow. "Why am I a freak?"

"You aren't a freak."

"No one else has this happen to them. No one else does magic like I can."

"Did you try to do magic?" No answer. "Liss? Did you try to heal the rabbit?"

"I reached out, just to see if I could maybe fix it, but there was just too much blood. . . . I couldn't."

The more she uses it, the worse it'll get. Stop her, Rose.

Lissa was right. Moroi magic could conjure fire and water, move rocks and other pieces of earth. But no one could heal or bring animals back from the dead. No one except Ms. Karp.

Stop her before they notice, before they notice and take her away too. Get her out of here.

I hated carrying this secret, mostly because I didn't know what to do about it. I didn't like feeling powerless. I needed to protect her from this—and from herself. And yet, at the same time, I needed to protect her from *them*, too.

"We should go," I said abruptly. "We're going to leave."

"Rose—"

"It's happening again. And it's worse. Worse than last time."

"You're afraid of the note."

"I'm not afraid of any note. But this place isn't safe."

I suddenly longed for Portland again. It might be dirtier and more crowded than the rugged Montana landscape, but at least you knew what to expect—not like here. Here at the Academy, past and present warred with each other. It might have its beautiful old walls and gardens, but inside, modern things were creeping in. People didn't know how to handle that. It was just like the

Moroi themselves. Their archaic royal families still held the power on the surface, but people were growing discontent. Dhampirs who wanted more to their lives. Moroi like Christian who wanted to fight the Strigoi. The royals still clung to their traditions, still touted their power over everyone else, just as the Academy's elaborate iron gates put on a show of tradition and invincibility.

And, oh, the lies and secrets. They ran through the halls and hid in the corners. Someone here hated Lissa, someone who was probably smiling right to her face and pretending to be her friend. I couldn't let them destroy her.

"You need to get some sleep," I told her.

"I can't sleep."

"Yes, you can. I'm right here. You won't be alone."

Anxiety and fear and other troubled emotions coursed through her. But in the end, her body's needs won out. After a while, I saw her eyes close. Her breathing became even, and the bond grew quiet.

I watched her sleep, too keyed up with adrenaline to allow myself any rest. I think maybe an hour had passed when the nurse returned and told me I had to leave.

"I can't go," I said. "I promised her she wouldn't be alone."

The nurse was tall, even for a Moroi, with kind brown eyes. "She won't be. I'll stay with her."

I regarded her skeptically.

"I promise."

Back in my room, I had my own crash. The fear and excitement had worn me out too, and for an instant, I wished I could have a normal life and a normal best friend. Immediately, I cast that thought out. No one was normal, not really. And I'd never have a better friend than Lissa . . . but man, it was so hard sometimes.

I slept heavily until morning. I went to my first class tentatively, nervous that word about last night had gotten around. As it turned out, people *were* talking about last night, but their attention was still focused on the queen and the reception. They knew nothing about the rabbit. As hard as it was to believe, I'd nearly forgotten about that other stuff. Still, it suddenly seemed like a small thing compared to someone causing a bloody explosion in Lissa's room.

Yet, as the day went on, I noticed something weird. People stopped looking at Lissa so much. They started looking at *me*. Whatever. Ignoring them, I hunted around and found Lissa finishing up with a feeder. That funny feeling I always got came over me as I watched her mouth work against the feeder's neck, drinking his blood. A trickle of it ran down his throat, standing out against his pale skin. Feeders, though human, were nearly as pale as Moroi from all the blood loss. He didn't seem to notice; he was long gone on the high of the bite. Drowning in jealousy, I decided I needed therapy.

"You okay?" I asked her later, on our way to class. She wore long sleeves, purposefully obscuring her wrists.

"Yeah . . . I still can't stop thinking about that rabbit. . . . It was so horrible. I keep seeing it in my head. And then what I did." She squeezed her eyes shut, just for a moment, and then opened them again. "People are talking about us."

"I know. Ignore them."

"I *hate* it," she said angrily. A surge of darkness shot up into her and through the bond. It made me cringe. My best friend was lighthearted and kind. She didn't have feelings like that. "I hate all the gossip. It's so stupid. How can they all be so shallow?"

"Ignore them," I repeated soothingly. "You were smart not to hang out with them anymore."

Ignoring them grew harder and harder, though. The whispers and looks increased. In animal behavior, it became so bad, I couldn't even concentrate on my now-favorite subject. Ms. Meissner had started talking about evolution and survival of the fittest and how animals sought mates with good genes. It fascinated me, but even she had a hard time staying on task, since she had to keep yelling at people to quiet down and pay attention.

"Something's going on," I told Lissa between classes. "I don't know what, but they're all over something new."

"Something else? Other than the queen hating me? What more could there be?"

"Wish I knew."

Things finally came to a head in our last class of the day, Slavic art. It started when a guy I barely knew made a very explicit and nearly obscene suggestion to me while we all worked on individual projects. I replied in kind, letting him know exactly what he could do with his request.

He only laughed. "Come on, Rose. I *bleed* for you."

Loud giggles ensued, and Mia cut us a taunting look. "Wait, it's Rose who does the bleeding, right?"

More laughter. Understanding slapped me in the face. I jerked Lissa away. "They know."

"Know what?"

"About us. About how you . . . you know, how I fed you while we were gone."

She gaped. "How?"

"How do you think? Your 'friend' Christian."

"No," she said adamantly. "He wouldn't have."

"Who else knew?"

Faith in Christian flashed in her eyes and in our bond. But she didn't know what I knew. She didn't know how I'd bitched him out last night, how I'd made him think she hated him. The guy was unstable. Spreading our biggest secret—well, one of them—would be an adequate revenge. Maybe he'd killed the rabbit, too. After all, it had died only a couple hours after I'd told him off.

Not waiting around to hear her protests, I stalked off to the other side of the room where Christian was working by himself, as usual. Lissa followed in my wake. Not caring if people saw us, I leaned across the table toward him, putting my face inches from his.

"I'm going to kill you."

His eyes darted to Lissa, the faintest glimmer of longing in them, and then a scowl spread over his face. "Why? Is it like guardian extra credit?"

"Stop with the attitude," I warned, pitching my voice low. "You told. You told how Lissa had to feed off me."

"Tell her," said Lissa desperately. "Tell her she's wrong."

Christian dragged his eyes from me to her, and as they regarded each other, I felt such a powerful wave of attraction, it was a wonder it didn't knock me over. Her heart was in her eyes. It was obvious to me he felt the same way about her, but she couldn't see it, particularly since he was still glaring at her.

"You can stop it, you know," he said. "You don't have to pretend anymore."

Lissa's giddy attraction vanished, replaced by hurt and shock over his tone. "I . . . what? Pretend what? . . ."

"You *know* what. Just stop. Stop with the act."

Lissa stared at him, her eyes wide and wounded. She had no clue I'd gone off on him last night. She had no clue that he believed she hated him.

"Get over feeling sorry for yourself, and tell us what's going on," I snapped at him. "Did you or didn't you tell them?"

He fixed me with a defiant look. "No. I didn't."

"I don't believe you."

"I do," said Lissa.

"I know it's impossible to believe a *freak* like me could keep his mouth shut—especially since neither of you can—but I have better things to do than spread stupid rumors. You want someone to blame? Blame your golden boy over there."

I followed his gaze to where Jesse was laughing about something with that idiot Ralf.

"Jesse doesn't know," said Lissa defiantly.

Christian's eyes were glued to me. "He *does,* though. Doesn't he, Rose? He knows."

My stomach sank out of me. Yes. Jesse did know. He'd figured it out that night in the lounge. "I didn't think . . . I didn't think he'd tell. He was too afraid of Dimitri."

"You *told* him?" exclaimed Lissa.

"No, he guessed." I was starting to feel sick.

"He apparently did more than guess," muttered Christian.

I turned on him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh. You don't know."

"I swear to God, Christian, I'm going to break your neck after class."

"Man, you really are unstable." He said it almost happily, but his next words were more serious. He still wore that sneer, still glowed with anger, but when he spoke, I could hear the faintest uneasiness in his voice. "He sort of elaborated on what was in your note. Got into a little more detail."

"Oh, I get it. He said we had sex." I didn't need to mince words. Christian nodded. So. Jesse was trying to boost his own reputation. Okay. That I could deal with. Not like my reputation was that stellar to begin with. Everyone already believed I had sex all the time.

"And uh, Ralf too. That you and he—"

Ralf? No amount of alcohol or any illegal substance would make me touch him. "I—what? That I had sex with Ralf too?"

Christian nodded.

"That asshole! I'm going to—"

"There's more."

"How? Did I sleep with the basketball team?"

"He said—they both said—you let them . . . well, you let them drink your blood."

That stopped even me. Drinking blood during sex. The dirtiest of the dirty. Sleazy. Beyond being easy or a slut. A gazillion times worse than Lissa drinking from me for survival. Blood-whore territory.

"That's crazy!" Lissa cried. "Rose would never—Rose?"

But I wasn't listening anymore. I was in my own world, a world that took me across the classroom to where Jesse and Ralf sat. They both looked up, faces half smug and half . . . nervous, if I had to guess. Not unexpected, since they were both lying through their teeth.

The entire class came to a standstill. Apparently they'd been expecting some type of showdown. My unstable reputation in action.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" I asked in a low, dangerous voice.

Jesse's nervous look turned to one of terror. He might have been taller than me, but we both knew who would win if I turned violent. Ralf, however, gave me a cocky smile.

"We didn't do anything you didn't want us to do." His smiled turned cruel. "And don't even think about laying a hand on us. You start a fight, and Kirova'll kick you out to go live with the other blood whores."

The rest of the students were holding their breaths, waiting to see what we'd do. I don't know how Mr. Nagy could have been oblivious to the drama occurring in his class.

I wanted to punch both of them, hit them so hard that it'd make Dimitri's brawl with Jesse look like a pat on the back. I wanted to wipe that smirk off Ralf's face.

But asshole or not, he was right. If I touched them, Kirova would expel me in the blink of an eye. And if I got kicked out, Lissa would be alone. Taking a deep breath, I made one of the hardest decisions of my life.

I walked away.

The rest of the day was miserable. In backing down from the fight, I opened myself up to mockery from everyone else. The rumors and whispers grew louder. People stared at me openly. People laughed. Lissa kept trying to talk to me, to console me, but I ignored even her. I went through the rest of my classes like a zombie, and then I headed off to practice with Dimitri as fast I could. He gave me a puzzled look but didn't ask any questions.

Alone in my room later on, I cried for the first time in years.

Once I got that out of my system, I was about to put on my pajamas when I heard a knock at my door. Dimitri. He studied my face and then glanced away, obviously aware I'd been crying. I could tell, too, that the rumors had finally reached him. He knew.

"Are you okay?"

"It doesn't matter if I am, remember?" I looked up at him. "Is Lissa okay? This'll be hard on her."

A funny look crossed his face. I think it astonished him that I'd still be worried about her at a time like this. He beckoned me to follow and led me out to a back stairwell, one that usually stayed locked to students. But it was

open tonight, and he gestured me outside. “Five minutes,” he warned.

More curious than ever, I stepped outside. Lissa stood there. I should have sensed she was close, but my own out-of-control feelings had obscured hers. Without a word, she put her arms around me and held me for several moments. I had to hold back more tears. When we broke apart, she looked at me with calm, level eyes.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“Not your fault. It’ll pass.”

She clearly doubted that. So did I.

“It *is* my fault,” she said. “She did it to get back at me.”

“She?”

“Mia. Jesse and Ralf aren’t smart enough to think of something like that on their own. You said it yourself: Jesse was too scared of Dimitri to talk much about what happened. And why wait until now? It happened a while ago. If he’d wanted to spread stuff around, he would have done it back then. Mia’s doing this as retaliation for you talking about her parents. I don’t know how she managed it, but she’s the one who got them to say those things.”

In my gut, I realized Lissa was right. Jesse and Ralf were the tools; Mia had been the mastermind.

“Nothing to be done now,” I sighed.

“Rose—”

“Forget it, Liss. It’s done, okay?”

She studied me quietly for a few seconds. “I haven’t seen you cry in a long time.”

“I wasn’t crying.”

A feeling of heartache and sympathy beat through to me from the bond.

“She can’t do this to you,” she argued.

I laughed bitterly, half surprised at my own hopeless-ness. “She already did. She said she’d get back at me, that I wouldn’t be able to protect you. She did it. When I go back to classes . . .” A sickening feeling settled in my stomach. I thought about the friends and respect I’d managed to eke out, despite our low profile. That would be gone. You couldn’t come back from something like this. Not among the Moroi. Once a blood whore, always a blood whore. What made it worse was that some dark, secret part of me did like being bitten.

“You shouldn’t have to keep protecting me,” she said.

I laughed. “That’s my job. I’m going to be your guardian.”

“I know, but I meant like this. You shouldn’t suffer because of me. You shouldn’t always have to look after me. And yet you always do. You got me out of here. You took care of everything when we were on our own. Even since coming back . . . you’ve always been the one who does all the work. Every time I break down—like last night—you’re always there. Me, I’m *weak*. I’m not like you.”

I shook my head. “That doesn’t matter. It’s what I do. I don’t mind.”

“Yeah, but look what happened. I’m the one she really has a grudge against—even though I still don’t know why. Whatever. It’s going to stop. I’m going to protect *you* from now on.”

There was a determination in her expression, a wonderful confidence radiating off of her that reminded me of the Lissa I’d known before the

accident. At the same time, I could feel something else in her—something darker, a sense of deeply buried anger. I'd seen this side of her before too, and I didn't like it. I didn't want her tapping into it. I just wanted her to be safe.

"Lissa, you can't protect me."

"I can," she said fiercely. "There's one thing Mia wants more than to destroy you and me. She wants to be accepted. She wants to hang out with the royals and feel like she's one of them. I can take that away from her." She smiled. "I can turn them against her."

"How?"

"By *telling* them." Her eyes flashed.

My mind was moving too slowly tonight. It took me a while to catch on. "Liss—no. You can't use compulsion. Not around here."

"I might as well get some use out of these stupid powers."

The more she uses it, the worse it'll get. Stop her, Rose. Stop her before they notice, before they notice and take her away too. Get her out of here.

"Liss, if you get caught—"

Dimitri stuck his head out. "You've got to get back inside, Rose, before someone finds you."

I shot a panicked look at Lissa, but she was already retreating. "I'll take care of everything this time, Rose. *Everything*."

THIRTEEN

THE AFTERMATH OF JESSE AND Ralf's lies was about as horrible as I'd expected. The only way I survived was by putting blinders on, by ignoring everyone and everything. It kept me sane—barely—but I hated it. I felt like crying all the time. I lost my appetite and didn't sleep well.

Yet, no matter how bad it got for me, I didn't worry about myself as much as I did Lissa. She stood by her promise to change things. It was slow at first, but gradually, I would see a royal or two come up to her at lunch or in class and say hello. She'd turn on a brilliant smile, laughing and talking to them like they were all best friends.

At first, I didn't understand how she was pulling it off. She'd told me she would use compulsion to win the other royals over and turn them against Mia. But I didn't *see* it happening. It was possible, of course, that she was winning people over without compulsion. After all, she was funny, smart, and nice. Anyone would like her. Something told me she wasn't winning friends the old-fashioned way, and I finally figured it out.

She was using compulsion when I wasn't around. I only saw her for a small part of the day, and since she knew I didn't approve, she only worked her power when I was away.

After a few days of this secret compulsion, I knew what I needed to do: I had to get back in her head again. By choice. I'd done it before; I could do it again.

At least, that's what I told myself, sitting and spacing out in Stan's class one day. But it wasn't as easy as I'd thought it would be, partly because I felt too keyed up to relax and open myself to her thoughts. I also had trouble because I picked a time when she felt relatively calm. She came through the "loudest" when her emotions were running strong.

Still, I tried to do what I'd done before, back when I'd spied on her and Christian. The meditation thing. Slow breathing. Eyes closed. Mental focus like that still wasn't easy for me, but at long last I managed the transition, slipping into her head and experiencing the world as hers. She stood in her American lit class, during project-work time, but, like most of the students, she wasn't working. She and Camille Conta leaned against a wall on the far side of the room, talking in hushed voices.

"It's gross," said Camille firmly, a frown crossing her pretty face. She had on a blue skirt made of velvetlike fabric, short enough to show off her long legs and possibly raise eyes about the dress code. "If you guys were doing it, I'm

not surprised she got addicted and did it with Jesse."

"She *didn't* do it with Jesse," insisted Lissa. "And it's not like we had *sex*. We just didn't have any feeders, that's all." Lissa focused her full attention on Camille and smiled. "It's no big deal. Everyone's overreacting."

Camille looked like she seriously doubted this, and then, the more she stared at Lissa, the more unfocused her eyes became. A blank look fell over her.

"Right?" asked Lissa, voice like silk. "It's not a big deal."

The frown returned. Camille tried to shake the compulsion. That fact that it'd even gotten this far was incredible. As Christian had observed, using it on Moroi was unheard of.

Camille, although strong-willed, lost the battle. "Yeah," she said slowly. "It's really not that big a deal."

"And Jesse's lying."

She nodded. "Definitely lying."

A mental strain burned inside of Lissa as she held onto the compulsion. It took a lot of effort, and she wasn't finished.

"What are you guys doing tonight?"

"Carly and I are going to study for Mattheson's test in her room."

"Invite me."

Camille thought about it. "Hey, you want to study with us?"

"Sure," said Lissa, smiling at her. Camille smiled back.

Lissa dropped the compulsion, and a wave of dizziness swept over her. She felt weak. Camille glanced around, momentarily surprised, then shook off the weirdness. "See you after dinner then."

"See you," murmured Lissa, watching her walk away. When Camille was gone, Lissa reached up to tie her hair up in a ponytail. Her fingers couldn't quite get all the hair through, and suddenly, another pair of hands caught hold and helped her. She spun around and found herself staring into Christian's ice-blue eyes. She jerked away from him.

"Don't do that!" she exclaimed, shivering at the realization that it had been *his* fingers touching her.

He gave her his lazy, slightly twisted smile and brushed a few pieces of unruly black hair out of his face. "Are you asking me or *ordering* me?"

"Shut up." She glanced around, both to avoid his eyes and make sure no one saw them together.

"What's the matter? Worried about what your slaves'll think if they see you talking to me?"

"They're my *friends*," she retorted.

"Oh. Right. Of course they are. I mean, from what I saw, Camille would probably *do anything* for you, right? Friends till the end." He crossed his arms over his chest, and in spite of her anger, she couldn't help but notice how the silvery gray of his shirt set off his black hair and blue eyes.

"At least she isn't like you. She doesn't pretend to be my friend one day and then ignore me for no reason."

An uncertain look flickered across his features. Tension and anger had built up between them in the last week, ever since I'd yelled at Christian after the royal reception. Believing what I'd told him, Christian had stopped talking to

her and had treated her rudely every time she'd tried to start a conversation. Now, hurt and confused, she'd given up attempts at being nice. The situation just kept getting worse and worse.

Looking out through Lissa's eyes, I could see that he still cared about her and still wanted her. His pride had been hurt, however, and he wasn't about to show weakness.

"Yeah?" he said in a low, cruel voice. "I thought that was the way all royals were supposed to act. You certainly seem to be doing a good job with it. Or maybe you're just using compulsion on me to make me think you're a two-faced bitch. Maybe you really aren't. But I doubt it."

Lissa flushed at the word *compulsion*—and cast another worried look around—but decided not to give him the satisfaction of arguing anymore. She simply gave him one last glare before storming off to join a group of royals huddled over an assignment

Returning to myself, I stared blankly around the classroom, processing what I'd seen. Some tiny, tiny part of me was starting to feel sorry for Christian. It was only a tiny part, though, and very easy to ignore.

At the beginning of the next day, I headed out to meet Dimitri. These practices were my favorite part of the day now, partly because of my stupid crush on him and partly because I didn't have to be around the others.

He and I started with running as usual, and he ran with me, quiet and almost gentle in his instructions, probably worried about causing some sort of breakdown. He knew about the rumors somehow, but he never mentioned them.

When we finished, he led me through an offensive exercise where I could use any makeshift weapons I could find to attack him. To my surprise, I managed to land a few blows on him, although they seemed to do me more damage than him. The impacts always made *me* stagger back, but he never budged. It still didn't stop me from attacking and attacking, fighting with an almost blind rage. I didn't know who I really fought in those moments: Mia or Jesse or Ralf. Maybe all of them.

Dimitri finally called a break. We carried the equipment we'd used on the field and returned everything to the supply room. While putting it away, he glanced at me and did a double take.

"Your hands." He swore in Russian. I could recognize it by now, but he refused to teach me what any of it meant. "Where are your gloves?"

I looked down at my hands. They'd suffered for weeks, and today had only made them worse. The cold had turned the skin raw and chapped, and some parts were actually bleeding a little. My blisters swelled. "Don't have any. Never needed them in Portland."

He swore again and beckoned me to a chair while he retrieved a first-aid kit. Wiping away the blood with a wet cloth, he told me gruffly, "We'll get you some."

I looked down at my destroyed hands as he worked. "This is only the start, isn't it?"

"Of what?"

"Me. Turning into Alberta. Her . . . and all the other female guardians. They're all leathery and stuff. Fighting and training and always being outdoors

—they aren't pretty anymore." I paused. "This . . . this life. It destroys them. Their looks, I mean."

He hesitated for a moment and looked up from my hands. Those warm brown eyes surveyed me, and something tightened in my chest. Damn it. I had to stop feeling this way around him. "It won't happen to *you*. You're too . . ." He groped for the right word, and I mentally substituted all sorts of possibilities. *Goddesslike. Scorchingly sexy.* Giving up, he simply said, "It won't happen to you."

He turned his attention back to my hands. Did he . . . did he think I was *pretty*? I never doubted the reaction I caused among guys my own age, but with him, I didn't know. The tightening in my chest increased.

"It happened to my mom. She used to be beautiful. I guess she still is, sort of. But not the way she used to be." Bitterly, I added, "Haven't seen her in a while. She could look completely different for all I know."

"You don't like your mother," he observed.

"You noticed that, huh?"

"You barely know her."

"That's the point. She abandoned me. She left me to be raised by the Academy."

When he finished cleaning my open wounds, he found a jar of salve and began rubbing it into the rough parts of my skin. I sort of got lost in the feel of his hands massaging mine.

"You say that . . . but what else should she have done? I know you want to be a guardian. I know how much it means to you. Do you think she feels any differently? Do you think she should have quit to raise you when you'd spend most of your life here anyway?"

I didn't like having reasonable arguments thrown at me. "Are you saying I'm a hypocrite?"

"I'm just saying maybe you shouldn't be so hard on her. She's a very respected dhampir woman. She's set you on the path to be the same."

"It wouldn't kill her to visit more," I muttered. "But I guess you're right. A little. It could have been worse, I suppose. I could have been raised with blood whores."

Dimitri looked up. "I was raised in a dhampir commune. They aren't as bad as you think."

"Oh." I suddenly felt stupid. "I didn't mean—"

"It's all right." He focused his attention back on my hands.

"So, did you, like, have family there? Grow up with them?"

He nodded. "My mother and two sisters. I didn't see them much after I went to school, but we still keep in touch. Mostly, the communities are about family. There's a lot of love there, no matter what stories you've heard."

My bitterness returned, and I glanced down to hide my glare. Dimitri had had a happier family life with his disgraced mother and relatives than I'd had with my "respected" guardian mother. He most certainly knew his mother better than I knew mine.

"Yeah, but . . . isn't it weird? Aren't there a lot of Moroi men visiting to, you know? . . ."

His hands rubbed circles into mine. "Sometimes."

There was something dangerous in his tone, something that told me this was an unwelcome topic. “I—I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bring up something bad. . . .”

“Actually . . . you probably wouldn’t think it’s bad,” he said after almost a minute had passed. A tight smile formed on his lips. “You don’t know your father, do you?”

I shook my head. “No. All I know is he must have had wicked cool hair.”

Dimitri glanced up, and his eyes swept me. “Yes. He must have.” Returning to my hands, he said carefully, “I knew mine.”

I froze. “Really? Most Moroi guys don’t stay—I mean, some do, but you know, usually they just—”

“Well, he liked my mother.” He didn’t say “liked” in a nice way. “And he visited her a lot. He’s my sisters’ father too. But when he came . . . well, he didn’t treat my mother very well. He did some horrible things.”

“Like . . .” I hesitated. This was Dimitri’s mother we were talking about. I didn’t know how far I could go. “Blood-whore things?”

“Like beating-her-up kinds of things,” he replied flatly.

He’d finished the bandages but was still holding my hands. I don’t even know if he noticed. I certainly did. His were warm and large, with long and graceful fingers. Fingers that might have played the piano in another life.

“Oh God,” I said. How horrible. I tightened my hands in his. He squeezed back. “That’s horrible. And she . . . she just let it happen?”

“She did.” The corner of his mouth turned up into a sly, sad smile. “But I didn’t.”

Excitement surged through me. “Tell me, *tell me* you beat the crap out of him.”

His smile grew. “I did.”

“Wow.” I hadn’t thought Dimitri could be any cooler, but I was wrong. “You beat up your dad. I mean, that’s really horrible . . . what happened. But, *wow*. You really are a god.”

He blinked. “What?”

“Uh, nothing.” Hastily, I tried to change the subject. “How old were you?”

He still seemed to be puzzling out the god comment. “Thirteen.”

Whoa. Definitely a god. “You beat up your dad when you were *thirteen*?”

“It wasn’t that hard. I was stronger than he was, almost as tall. I couldn’t let him keep doing that. He had to learn that being royal and Moroi doesn’t mean you can do anything you want to other people—even blood whores.”

I stared. I couldn’t believe he’d just said that about his mother. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right.”

Pieces clicked into place for me. “That’s why you got so upset about Jesse, isn’t it? He was another royal, trying to take advantage of a dhampir girl.”

Dimitri averted his eyes. “I got upset over that for a lot of reasons. After all, you were breaking the rules, and . . .”

He didn’t finish, but he looked back into my eyes in a way that made warmth build between us.

Thinking about Jesse soon darkened my mood, unfortunately. I looked down. “I know you heard what people are saying, that I—”

“I know it’s not true,” he interrupted.

His immediate, certain answer surprised me, and I stupidly found myself questioning it. “Yeah, but how do you—”

“Because I know you,” he replied firmly. “I know your character. I know you’re going to be a great guardian.”

His confidence made that warm feeling return. “I’m glad someone does. Everyone else thinks I’m totally irresponsible.”

“With the way you worry more about Lissa than yourself . . .” He shook his head. “No. You understand your responsibilities better than guardians twice your age. You’ll do what you have to do to succeed.”

I thought about that. “I don’t know if I can do everything I have to do.”

He did that cool one-eyebrow thing.

“I don’t want to cut my hair,” I explained.

He looked puzzled. “You don’t have to cut your hair. It’s not required.”

“All the other guardian women do. They show off their tattoos.”

Unexpectedly, he released my hands and leaned forward. Slowly, he reached out and held a lock of my hair, twisting it around one finger thoughtfully. I froze, and for a moment, there was nothing going on in the world except him touching my hair. He let my hair go, looking a little surprised—and embarrassed—at what he’d done.

“Don’t cut it,” he said gruffly.

Somehow, I remembered how to talk again. “But no one’ll see my tattoos if I don’t.”

He moved toward the doorway, a small smile playing over his lips. “Wear it up.”

FOURTEEN

I CONTINUED SPYING ON LISSA over the next couple of days, feeling mildly guilty each time. She'd always hated it when I did by accident, and now I did it on purpose.

Steadily, I watched as she reintegrated herself into the royal power players one by one. She couldn't do group compulsion, but catching one person alone was just as effective, if slower. And really, a lot didn't need to be compelled to start hanging out with her again. Many weren't as shallow as they seemed; they remembered Lissa and liked her for who she was. They flocked to her, and now, a month and a half after our return to the Academy, it was like she'd never left at all. And during this rise to fame, she advocated for me and rallied against Mia and Jesse.

One morning, I tuned into her while she was getting ready for breakfast. She'd spent the last twenty minutes blow-drying and straightening her hair, something she hadn't done in a while. Natalie, sitting on the bed in their room, watched the process with curiosity. When Lissa moved on to makeup, Natalie finally spoke.

"Hey, we're going to watch a movie in Erin's room after school. You going to come?" I'd always made jokes about Natalie being boring, but her friend Erin had the personality of dry wall.

"Can't. I'm going to help Camille bleach Carly's hair."

"You sure spend a lot of time with them now."

"Yeah, I guess." Lissa dabbed mascara across her lashes, instantly making her eyes look bigger.

"I thought you didn't like them anymore."

"I changed my mind."

"They sure seem to like you a lot now. I mean, not that anyone wouldn't like you, but once you came back and didn't talk to them, they seemed okay ignoring you too. I heard them talking about you a lot. I guess that's not surprising, because they're Mia's friends too, but isn't it weird how much they like you now? Like, I hear them always waiting to see what you want to do before they make plans and stuff. And a bunch of them are defending Rose now, which is *really* crazy. Not that I believe any of that stuff about her, but I never would have thought it was possible—"

Underneath Natalie's rambling was the seed of suspicion, and Lissa picked up on it. Natalie probably never would have dreamed of compulsion, but Lissa couldn't risk innocent questions turning into something more. "You know

what?" she interrupted. "Maybe I will swing by Erin's after all. I bet Carly's hair won't take that long."

The offer derailed Natalie's train of thought. "Really? Oh wow, that would be great. She was telling me how sad she was that you're not around as much anymore, and I told her . . ."

On it went. Lissa continued her compulsion and return to popularity. I watched it all quietly, always worrying, even though her efforts were starting to reduce the stares and gossip about me.

"This is going to backfire," I whispered to her in church one day. "Someone's going to start wondering and asking questions."

"Stop being so melodramatic. Power shifts all the time around here."

"Not like this."

"You don't think my winning personality could do this on its own?"

"Of course I do, but if Christian spotted *it* right away, then someone else will __"

My words were interrupted when two guys farther down the pew suddenly exploded into snickers. Glancing up, I saw them looking right at me, not even bothering to hide their smirks.

Looking away, I tried to ignore them, suddenly hoping the priest would start up soon. But Lissa returned their looks, and a sudden fierceness flashed across her face. She didn't say a word, but their smiles grew smaller under her heavy gaze.

"Tell her you're sorry," she told them. "And make sure she believes it."

A moment later, they practically fell all over themselves apologizing to me and begging for forgiveness. I couldn't believe it. She'd used compulsion in public—in church, of all places. *And* on two people at the same time.

They finally exhausted their supply of apologies, but Lissa wasn't finished.

"That's the *best* you can do?" she snapped.

Their eyes widened in alarm, both terrified that they'd angered her.

"Liss," I said quickly, touching her arm. "It's okay. I, uh, accept their apologies."

Her face still radiated disapproval, but she finally nodded. The guys slumped in relief.

Yikes. I'd never felt so relieved to have a service start. Through the bond, I felt a sort of dark satisfaction coming from Lissa. It was uncharacteristic for her, and I didn't like it.

Needing to distract myself from her troubling behavior, I studied other people as I so often did. Nearby, Christian openly watched Lissa, a troubled look on his face. When he saw me, he scowled and turned away.

Dimitri sat in the back as usual, for once not scanning every corner for danger. His attention was turned inward, his expression almost pained. I still didn't know why he came to church. He always seemed to be wrestling with something.

In the front, the priest was talking about St. Vladimir again.

"His spirit was strong, and he was truly gifted by God. When he touched them, the crippled walked, and the blind could see. Where he walked, flowers bloomed."

Man, the Moroi needed to get more saints—

Healing cripples and blind people?

I'd forgotten all about St. Vladimir. Mason had mentioned Vladimir bringing people back from the dead, and it had reminded me of Lissa at the time. Then other things had distracted me. I hadn't thought about the saint or his "shadow-kissed" guardian—and their bond—in a while. How could I have overlooked this? Ms. Karp, I realized, wasn't the only other Moroi who could heal like Lissa. Vladimir could too.

"And all the while, the masses gathered to him, loving him, eager to follow his teachings and hear him preach the word of God. . . ."

Turning, I stared at Lissa. She gave me a puzzled look. "What?"

I didn't get a chance to elaborate—I don't even know if I could have formed the words—because I was whisked back to my prison almost as soon as I stood up at the end of the service.

Back in my room, I went online to research St. Vladimir but turned up nothing useful. Damn it. Mason had skimmed the books in the library and said there was little there. What did that leave me with? I had no way of learning more about that dusty old saint.

Or did I? What had Christian said that first day with Lissa?

Over there, we have an old box full of the writings of the blessed and crazy St. Vladimir.

The storage room above the chapel. It had the writings. Christian had pointed them out. I needed to look at them, but how? I couldn't ask the priest. How would he react if he found out students were going up there? It'd put an end to Christian's lair. But maybe . . . maybe Christian himself could help. It was Sunday, though, and I wouldn't see him until tomorrow afternoon. Even then, I didn't know if I'd get a chance to talk to him alone.

While heading out to practice later, I stopped in the dorm's kitchen to grab a granola bar. As I did, I passed a couple of novice guys, Miles and Anthony. Miles whistled when he saw me.

"How's it been going, Rose? You getting lonely? Want some company?"

Anthony laughed. "I can't bite you, but I can give you something else you want."

I had to pass through the doorway they stood in to get outside. Glaring, I pushed past, but Miles caught me around the waist, his hand sliding down to my butt.

"Get your hands off my ass before I break your face," I told him, jerking away. In doing so, I only bumped into Anthony.

"Come on," Anthony said, "I thought you didn't have a problem taking on two guys at the same time."

A new voice spoke up. "If you guys don't walk away right now, *I'll* take both of you on." Mason. My hero.

"You're so full of it, Ashford," said Miles. He was the bigger of the two and left me to go square off with Mason. Anthony backed off from me, more interested in whether or not there'd be a fight. There was so much testosterone in the air, I felt like I needed a gas mask.

"Are you doing her too?" Miles asked Mason. "You don't want to share?"

"Say one more word about her, and I'll rip your head off."

"Why? She's just a cheap blood—"

Mason punched him. It didn't rip Miles' head off or even cause anything to break or bleed, but it looked like it hurt. His eyes widened, and he lunged toward Mason. The sound of doors opening in the hall caused everyone to freeze. Novices got in a lot of trouble for fighting.

"Probably some guardians coming." Mason grinned. "You want them to know you were beating up on a girl?"

Miles and Anthony exchanged glances. "Come on," Anthony said. "Let's go. We don't have time for this."

Miles reluctantly followed. "I'll find you later, Ashford."

When they were gone, I turned on Mason. "'Beat up on a girl'?"

"You're welcome," he said drily.

"I didn't need your help."

"Sure. You were doing just fine on your own."

"They caught me off guard, that's all. I could have dealt with them eventually."

"Look, don't take being pissed off at them out on me."

"I just don't like being treated like . . . a girl."

"You *are* a girl. And I was just trying to help."

I looked at him and saw the earnestness on his face. He meant well. No point in being a bitch to him when I had so many other people to hate lately.

"Well . . . thanks. Sorry I snapped at you."

We talked a little bit, and I managed to get him to spill some more school gossip. He had noticed Lissa's rise in status but didn't seem to find it strange. As I talked to him, I noticed the adoring look he always got around me spread across his face. It made me sad to have him feel that way about me. Guilty, even.

How hard would it be, I wondered, to go out with him? He was nice, funny, and reasonably good-looking. We got along. Why did I get caught up in so many messes with other guys when I had a perfectly sweet one here who wanted me? Why couldn't I just return his feelings?

The answer came to me before I'd even finished asking myself the question. I couldn't be Mason's girlfriend because when I imagined someone holding me and whispering dirty things in my ear, he had a Russian accent.

Mason continued watching me admiringly, oblivious to what was going on in my head. And seeing that adoration, I suddenly realized how I could use it to my advantage.

Feeling a little guilty, I shifted my conversation to a more flirty style and watched Mason's glow increase.

I leaned beside him on the wall so our arms just touched and gave him a lazy smile. "You know, I still don't approve of your whole hero thing, but you did scare them. That was almost worth it."

"But you don't approve?"

I trailed fingers up his arm. "No. I mean, it's hot in principle but not in practice."

He laughed. "The hell it isn't." He caught hold of my hand and gave me a knowing look. "Sometimes you need to be saved. I think you like being saved sometimes and just can't admit it."

"And I think *you* get off on saving people and just can't admit it."

“I don’t think you know what gets me off. Saving damsels like you is just the honorable thing to do,” he declared loftily.

I repressed the urge to smack him over the use of *damsels*. “Then prove it. Do me a favor just because it’s ‘the right thing to do.’”

“Sure,” he said immediately. “Name it.”

“I need you to get a message to Christian Ozera.”

His eagerness faltered. “What the—? You aren’t serious.”

“Yes. Completely.”

“Rose . . . I can’t talk to him. You know that.”

“I thought you said you’d help. I thought you said helping ‘damsels’ is the honorable thing to do.”

“I don’t really see how honor’s involved here.” I gave him the most smoldering look I could manage. He caved. “What do you want me to tell him?”

“Tell him I need St. Vladimir’s books. The ones in storage. He needs to sneak them to me soon. Tell him it’s for Lissa. And tell him . . . tell him I lied the night of the reception.” I hesitated. “Tell him I’m sorry.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“It doesn’t have to. Just do it. Please?” I turned on the beauty queen smile again.

With hasty assurances that he’d see what he could do, he left for lunch, and I went off to practice.

FIFTEEN

MASON DELIVERED. He found me the next day before school. He was carrying a box of books.

"I got them," he said. "Hurry and take them before you get in trouble for talking to me."

He handed them over, and I grunted. They were heavy. "Christian gave you these?"

"Yeah. Managed to talk to him without anyone noticing. He's got kind of an attitude, did you ever notice that?"

"Yeah, I noticed." I rewarded Mason with a smile that he ate up. "Thanks. This means a lot."

I hauled the loot up to my room, fully aware of how weird it was that someone who hated to study as much as I did was about to get buried in dusty crap from the fourteenth century. When I opened the first book, though, I saw that these must be reprints of reprints of reprints, probably because anything that old would have long since fallen apart.

Sifting through the books, I discovered they fell into three categories: books written by people after St. Vladimir had died, books written by other people when he was still alive, and one diary of sorts written by him. What had Mason said about primary and secondary sources? Those last two groups were the ones I wanted.

Whoever had reprinted these had reworded the books enough so that I didn't have to read Ye Olde English or anything. Or rather, Russian, I supposed. St. Vladimir had lived in the old country.

Today I healed the mother of Sava who has long since suffered from sharp pains within her stomach. Her malady is now gone, but God has not allowed me to do such a thing lightly. I am weak and dizzy, and the madness is trying to leak into my head. I thank God every day for shadow-kissed Anna, for without her, I would surely not be able to endure.

Anna again. And "shadow-kissed." He talked about her a lot, among other things. Most of the time he wrote long sermons, just like what I'd hear in church. Super boring. But other times, the book read just like a diary, recapping what he did each day. And if it really wasn't just a load of crap, he healed all the time. Sick people. Injured people. Even plants. He brought dead crops back to life when people were starving. Sometimes he would make flowers bloom just for the hell of it.

Reading on, I found out that it was a good thing old Vlad had Anna around, because he was pretty messed up. The more he used his powers, the more they started to get to him. He'd get irrationally angry and sad. He blamed it on demons and stupid stuff like that, but it was obvious he suffered from depression. Once, he admitted in his diary, he tried to kill himself. Anna stopped him.

Later, browsing through the book written by the guy who knew Vladimir, I read:

And many think it miraculous too, the power the blessed Vladimir shows over others. Moroi and dhampirs flock to him and listen to his words, happy just to be near him. Some say it is madness that touches him and not spirit, but most adore him and would do anything he asked. Such is the way God marks his favorites, and if such moments are followed by hallucinations and despair, it is a small sacrifice for the amount of good and leadership he can show among the people.

It sounded a lot like what the priest had said, but I sensed more than just a "winning personality." People adored him, would do anything he asked. Yes, Vladimir had used compulsion on his followers, I was certain. A lot of Moroi had in those days, before it was banned, but they didn't use it on Moroi or dhampirs. They couldn't. Only Lissa could.

I shut the book and leaned back against my bed. Vladimir healed plants and animals. He could use compulsion on a massive scale. And by all accounts, using those sorts of powers had made him crazy and depressed.

Added into it all, making it that much weirder was that everyone kept describing his guardian as "shadow-kissed." That expression had bugged me ever since I first heard it. . . .

"You're *shadow-kissed*! You have to take care of her!"

Ms. Karp had shouted those words at me, her hands clenching my shirt and jerking me toward her. It had happened on a night two years ago when I'd been inside the main part of the upper school to return a book. It was nearly past curfew, and the halls were empty. I'd heard a loud commotion, and then Ms. Karp had come tearing around the corner, looking frantic and wild-eyed.

She shoved me into a wall, still gripping me. "Do you understand?"

I knew enough self-defense that I could have probably pushed her away, but my shock kept me frozen. "No."

"They're coming for me. They'll come for her."

"Who?"

"Lissa. You have to protect her. The more she uses it, the worse it'll get. Stop her, Rose. Stop her before they notice, before they notice and take her away too. Get her out of here."

"I . . . what do you mean? Get her out of . . . you mean the Academy?"

"Yes! You have to leave. You're bound. It's up to you. Take her away from this place."

Her words were crazy. No one left the Academy. Yet as she held me there and stared into my eyes, I began to feel strange. A fuzzy feeling clouded my mind. What she said suddenly sounded very reasonable, like the most reasonable thing in the world. Yes. I needed to take Lissa away, take her—

Feet pounded in the hallway, and a group of guardians rounded the corner.

I didn't recognize them; they weren't from the school. They pried her off of me, restraining her wild thrashing. Someone asked me if I was okay, but I could only keep staring at Ms. Karp.

"Don't let her use the power!" she screamed. "Save her. Save her from herself!"

The guardians had later explained to me that she wasn't well and had been taken to a place where she could recover. She would be safe and cared for, they assured me. She would recover.

Only she hadn't.

Back in the present, I stared at the books and tried to put it all together. Lissa. Ms. Karp. St. Vladimir.

What was I supposed to do?

Someone rapped at my door, and I jerked out of my memories. No one had visited me, not even staff, since my suspension. When I opened the door, I saw Mason in the hall.

"Twice in one day?" I asked. "And how'd you even get up here?"

He flashed his easy smile. "Someone put a lit match in one of the bathroom's garbage cans. Damn shame. The staff's kind of busy. Come on, I'm springing you."

I shook my head. Setting fires was apparently a new sign of affection. Christian had done it and now Mason. "Sorry, no saving me tonight. If I get caught—"

"Lissa's orders."

I shut up and let him smuggle me out of the building. He took me over to the Moroi dorm and miraculously got me in and up to her room unseen. I wondered if there was a distracting bathroom fire in this building too.

Inside her room, I found a party in full swing. Lissa, Camille, Carly, Aaron, and a few other royals sat around laughing, listening to loud music, and passing around bottles of whiskey. No Mia, no Jesse. Natalie, I noticed a few moments later, sat apart from the group, clearly unsure how to act around all of them. Her awkwardness was totally obvious.

Lissa stumbled to her feet, the fuzzy feelings in our bond indicating she'd been drinking for a while. "Rose!" She turned to Mason with a dazzling smile. "You delivered."

He swept her an over-the-top bow. "I'm at your command."

I hoped he'd done it for the thrill of it and not because of any compulsion. Lissa slung an arm around my waist and pulled me down with the others. "Join the festivities."

"What are we celebrating?"

"I don't know. Your escape tonight?"

A few of the others held up plastic cups, cheering and toasting me. Xander Badica poured two more cups, handing them to Mason and me. I took mine with a smile, all the while feeling uneasy about the night's turn of events. Not so long ago, I would have welcomed a party like this and would have downed my drink in thirty seconds. Too much bothered me this time, though. Like the fact that the royals were treating Lissa like a goddess. Like how none of them seemed to remember that I had been accused of being a blood whore. Like how Lissa was completely unhappy despite her smiles and laughter.

"Where'd you get the whiskey?" I asked.

"Mr. Nagy," Aaron said. He sat very close to Lissa.

Everyone knew Mr. Nagy drank all the time after school and kept a stash on campus. He continually used new hiding places—and students continually found them.

Lissa leaned against Aaron's shoulder. "Aaron helped me break into his room and take them. He had them hidden in the bottom of the paint closet."

The others laughed, and Aaron gazed at her with complete and utter worship. Amusingly, I realized she hadn't had to use any compulsion on him. He was just that crazy for her. He always had been.

"Why aren't you drinking?" Mason asked me a little while later, speaking quietly into my ear.

I glanced down at my cup, half surprised to see it full. "I don't know. I guess I don't think guardians should drink around their charges."

"She's not your charge yet! You aren't on duty. You won't be for a long time. Since when did you get so responsible?"

I didn't really think I was all that responsible. But I *was* thinking about what Dimitri had said about balancing fun and obligation. It just seemed wrong to let myself go wild when Lissa was in such a vulnerable state lately. Wiggling out of my tight spot between her and Mason, I walked over and sat beside Natalie.

"Hey Nat, you're quiet tonight."

She held a cup as full as mine. "So are you."

I laughed softly. "I guess so."

She tilted her head, watching Mason and the royals like they were some sort of science experiment. They'd consumed a lot more whiskey since I'd arrived, and the silliness had shot up considerably. "Weird, huh? You used to be the center of attention. Now she is."

I blinked in surprise. I hadn't considered it like that. "I guess so."

"Hey, Rose," said Xander, nearly spilling his drink as he walked over to me. "What was it like?"

"What was what like?"

"Letting someone feed off you?"

The others fell quiet, a sort of anticipation settling over them.

"She didn't do that," said Lissa in a warning voice. "I told you."

"Yeah, yeah, I know nothing happened with Jesse and Ralf. But you guys did it, right? While you were gone?"

"Let it go," said Lissa. Compulsion worked best with direct eye contact, and his attention was focused on me, not her.

"I mean, it's cool and everything. You guys did what you had to do, right? It's not like you're a feeder. I just want to know what it was like. Danielle Szelsky let me bite her once. She said it didn't feel like anything."

There was a collective "ew" from among the girls. Sex and blood with dhampirs was dirty; between Moroi, it was cannibalistic.

"You are such a liar," said Camille.

"No, I'm serious. It was just a small bite. She didn't get high like the feeders. Did *you*?" He put his free arm around my shoulder. "Did you like it?"

Lissa's face went still and pale. Alcohol muted the full force of her feelings,

but I could read enough to know how she felt. Dark, scared thoughts trickled into me—underscored with anger. She usually had a good grip on her temper—unlike me—but I'd seen it flare up before. Once it had happened at a party very similar to this one, just a few weeks after Ms. Karp had been taken away.

Greg Dashkov—a distant cousin of Natalie's—had held the party in his room. His parents apparently knew someone who knew someone, because he had one of the biggest rooms in the dorm. He'd been friends with Lissa's brother before the accident and had been more than happy to take Andre's little sister into his social fold. Greg had also been happy to take me in, and the two of us had been all over each other that night. For a sophomore like me, being with a royal Moroi senior was a huge rush.

I drank a lot that night but still managed to keep an eye on Lissa. She always wore an edge of anxiety around this many people, but no one really noticed, because she could interact with them so well. My heavy buzz kept a lot of her feelings from me, but as long as she looked okay, I didn't worry.

Mid-kiss, Greg suddenly broke away and looked at something over my shoulder. We both sat in the same chair, with me on his lap, and I craned my neck to see. "What is it?"

He shook his head with a sort of amused exasperation. "Wade brought a feeder."

I followed his gaze to where Wade Voda stood with his arm around a frail girl about my age. She was human and pretty, with wavy blond hair and porcelain skin pale from so much blood loss. A few other guys had homed on her and stood with Wade, laughing and touching her face and hair.

"She's already fed too much today," I said, observing her coloring and complete look of confusion.

Greg slid his hand behind my neck and turned me back to him. "They won't hurt her."

We kissed a while longer and then I felt a tap on my shoulder. "Rose."

I looked up into Lissa's face. Her anxious expression startled me because I couldn't feel the emotions behind it. Too much beer for me. I climbed off of Greg's lap.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"Be right back." I pulled Lissa aside, suddenly wishing I was sober. "What's wrong?"

"Them."

She nodded toward the guys with the feeder girl. She still had a group around her, and when she shifted to look at one of them, I saw small red wounds scattered on her neck. They were doing a sort of group feeding, taking turns biting her and making gross suggestions. High and oblivious, she let them.

"They can't do that," Lissa told me.

"She's a feeder. Nobody's going to stop them."

Lissa looked up at me with pleading eyes. Hurt, outrage, and anger filled them. "Will *you*?"

I'd always been the aggressive one, looking after her ever since we were little. Seeing her there now, so upset and looking at me to fix things, was more than I could stand. Giving her a shaky nod, I stumbled over to the group.

"You so desperate to get some that you've got to drug girls now, Wade?" I asked.

He glanced up from where he'd been running his lips over the human girl's neck. "Why? Are you done with Greg and looking for more?"

I put my hands on my hips and hoped I looked fierce. The truth was, I was actually starting to feel a little nauseous from all I'd drunk. "Aren't enough drugs in the world to get me near you," I told him. A few of his friends laughed. "But maybe you can go make out with that lamp over there. It seems to be out of it enough to make even you happy. You don't need *her* anymore." A few other people laughed.

"This isn't any of your business," he hissed. "She's just lunch." Referring to feeders as meals was about the only thing worse than calling dhampirs blood whores.

"This isn't a feeding room. Nobody wants to see this."

"Yeah," agreed a senior girl. "It's gross." A few of her friends agreed.

Wade glared at all of us, me the hardest. "Fine. None of you have to see it. Come on." He grabbed the feeder girl's arm and jerked her away. Clumsily, she stumbled along with him out of the room, making soft whimpering noises.

"Best I could do," I told Lissa.

She stared at me, shocked. "He's just going to take her to his room. He'll do even worse things to her."

"Liss, I don't like it either, but it's not like I can go chase him down or anything." I rubbed my forehead. "I could go punch him or something, but I feel like I'm going to throw up as it is."

Her face grew dark, and she bit her lip. "He can't do that."

"I'm sorry."

I returned to the chair with Greg, feeling a little bad about what had happened. I didn't want to see the feeder get taken advantage of anymore than Lissa did—it reminded me too much of what a lot of Moroi guys thought they could do to dhampir girls. But I also couldn't win this battle, not tonight.

Greg had shifted me around to get a better angle on my neck when I noticed Lissa was gone a few minutes later. Practically falling, I clambered off his lap and looked around. "Where's Lissa?"

He reached for me. "Probably the bathroom."

I couldn't feel a thing through the bond. The alcohol had numbed it. Stepping out into the hallway, I breathed a sigh of relief at escaping the loud music and voices. It was quiet out here—except for a crashing sound a couple rooms down. The door was ajar, and I pushed my way inside.

The feeder girl cowered in a corner, terrified. Lissa stood with arms crossed, her face angry and terrible. She was staring at Wade intently, and he stared back, enchanted. He also held a baseball bat, and it looked like he'd used it already, because the room was trashed: bookshelves, the stereo, the mirror. . .

.

"Break the window too," Lissa told him smoothly. "Come on. It doesn't matter."

Hypnotized, he walked over to the large, tinted window. I stared, my mouth nearly hitting the floor, as he pulled back and slammed the bat into the glass. It shattered, sending shards everywhere and letting in the early morning light

it normally kept blocked out. He winced as it shone in his eyes, but he didn't move away.

"Lissa," I exclaimed. "Stop it. Make him stop."

"He should have stopped earlier."

I barely recognized the look on her face. I'd never seen her so upset, and I'd certainly never seen her do anything like this. I knew what it was, of course. I knew right away. Compulsion. For all I knew, she was seconds away from having him turn the bat on himself.

"Please, Lissa. Don't do it anymore. Please."

Through the fuzzy, alcoholic buzz, I felt a trickle of her emotions. They were strong enough to practically knock me over. Black. Angry. Merciless. Startling feelings to be coming from sweet and steady Lissa. I'd known her since kindergarten, but in that moment, I barely knew her.

And I was afraid.

"Please, Lissa," I repeated. "He's not worth it. Let him go."

She didn't look at me. Her stormy eyes were focused entirely on Wade. Slowly, carefully, he lifted up the bat, tilting it so that it lined up with his own skull.

"Liss," I begged. Oh God. I was going to have to tackle her or something to make her stop. "Don't do it."

"He should have stopped," Lissa said evenly. The bat quit moving. It was now at exactly the right distance to gain momentum and strike. "He shouldn't have done that to her. People can't treat other people like that—even feeders."

"But you're scaring her," I said softly. "Look at her."

Nothing happened at first, then Lissa let her gaze flick toward the feeder. The human girl still sat huddled in a corner, arms wrapped around herself protectively. Her blue eyes were enormous, and light reflected off her wet, tear-streaked face. She gave a choked, terrified sob.

Lissa's face stayed impassive. Inside her, I could feel the battle she was waging for control. Some part of her didn't want to hurt Wade, despite the blinding anger that otherwise filled her. Her face crumpled, and she squeezed her eyes shut. Her right hand reached out to her left wrist and clenched it, nails digging deep into the flesh. She flinched at the pain, but through the bond, I felt the shock of the pain distract her from Wade.

She let go of the compulsion, and he dropped the bat, suddenly looking confused. I let go of the breath I'd been holding. In the hallway, footsteps sounded. I'd left the door open, and the crash had attracted attention. A couple of dorm staff members burst into the room, freezing when they saw the destruction in front of them.

"What happened?"

The rest of us looked at each other. Wade looked completely lost. He stared at the room, at the bat, and then at Lissa and me. "I don't know. . . . I can't . . ." He turned his full attention to me and suddenly grew angry. "What the—it was you! You wouldn't let the feeder thing go."

The dorm workers looked at me questioningly, and in a few seconds, I made up my mind.

You have to protect her. The more she uses it, the worse it'll get. Stop her, Rose. Stop her before they notice, before they notice and take her away too. Get her out

of here.

I could see Ms. Karp's face in my mind, pleading frantically. I gave Wade a haughty look, knowing full well no one would question a confession I made or even suspect Lissa.

"Yeah, well, if you'd let her go," I told him, "I wouldn't have had to do this."

Save her. Save her from herself.

After that night, I never drank again. I refused to let my guard down around Lissa. And two days later, while I was supposed to be suspended for "destruction of property," I took Lissa and broke out of the Academy.

Back in Lissa's room, with Xander's arm around me and her angry and upset eyes on us, I didn't know if she'd do anything drastic again. But the situation reminded me too much of that one from two years ago, and I knew I had to defuse it.

"Just a little blood," Xander was saying. "I won't take much. I just want to see what dhampir tastes like. Nobody here cares."

"Xander," growled Lissa, "leave her alone."

I slipped out from under his arm and smiled, looking for a funny retort rather than one that might start a fight. "Come on," I teased. "I had to hit the last guy who asked me that, and you're a hell of a lot prettier than Jesse. It'd be a waste."

"Pretty?" he asked. "I'm stunningly sexy but not *pretty*."

Carly laughed. "No, you're pretty. Todd told me you buy some kind of French hair gel."

Xander, distracted as so many drunk people easily are, turned around to defend his honor, forgetting me. The tension disappeared, and he took the teasing about his hair with a good attitude.

Across the room, Lissa met my eyes with relief. She smiled and gave me a small nod of thanks before she returned her attention to Aaron.

SIXTEEN

THE NEXT DAY, IT FULLY hit me how much things had changed since the Jesse-and-Rail rumors first started. For some people, I remained a nonstop source of whispers and laughter. From Lissa's converts, I received friendliness and occasional defense. Overall, I realized, our classmates actually gave me very little of their attention anymore. This became especially true when something new distracted everyone.

Lissa and Aaron.

Apparently, Mia had found about the party and had blown up when she learned that Aaron had been there without her. She'd bitched at him and told him that if he wanted to be with her, he couldn't run around and hang out with Lissa. So Aaron had decided he didn't want to be with her. He'd broken up with her that morning . . . and moved on.

Now he and Lissa were all over each other. They stood around in the hall and at lunch, arms wrapped around one another, laughing and talking. Lissa's bond feelings showed only mild interest, despite her gazing at him as though he was the most fascinating thing on the planet. Most of this was for show, unbeknownst to him. He looked as though he could have built a shrine at her feet at any moment.

And me? I felt ill.

My feelings were nothing, however, compared to Mia's. At lunch, she sat on the far side of the room from us, eyes fixed pointedly ahead, ignoring the consolations of the friends near her. She had blotchy pink patches on her pale, round cheeks, and her eyes were red-rimmed. She said nothing mean when I walked past. No smug jokes. No mocking glares. Lissa had destroyed her, just as Mia had vowed to do us.

The only person more miserable than Mia was Christian. Unlike her, he had no qualms about studying the happy couple while wearing an open look of hatred on his face. As usual, no one except me even noticed.

After watching Lissa and Aaron make out for the tenth time, I left lunch early and went to see Ms. Carmack, the teacher who taught elemental basics. I'd been wanting to ask her something for a while.

"Rose, right?" She seemed surprised to see me but not angry or annoyed like half the other teachers did lately.

"Yeah. I have a question about, um, magic."

She raised an eyebrow. Novices didn't take magic classes. "Sure. What do you want to know?"

“I was listening to the priest talk about St. Vladimir the other day. . . . Do you know what element he specialized in? Vladimir, I mean. Not the priest.”

She frowned. “Odd. As famous as he is around here, I’m surprised it never comes up. I’m no expert, but in all the stories I’ve heard, he never did anything that I’d say connects to any one of the elements. Either that or no one ever recorded it.”

“What about his healings?” I pushed further. “Is there an element that lets you perform those?”

“No, not that I know of.” Her lips quirked into a small smile. “People of faith would say he healed through the power of God, not any sort of elemental magic. After all, one thing the stories are certain about is that he was ‘full of spirit.’”

“Is it possible he didn’t specialize?”

Her smile faded. “Rose, is this really about St. Vladimir? Or is it about Lissa?”

“Not exactly . . .” I stammered.

“I know it’s hard on her—especially in front of all her classmates—but she has to be patient,” she explained gently. “It will happen. It always happens.”

“But sometimes it doesn’t.”

“Rarely. But I don’t think she’ll be one of those. She’s got a higher-than-average aptitude in all four, even if she hasn’t hit specialized levels. One of them will shoot up any day now.”

That gave me an idea. “Is it possible to specialize in more than one element?”

She laughed and shook her head. “No. Too much power. No one could handle all that magic, not without losing her mind.”

Oh. Great.

“Okay. Thanks.” I started to leave, then thought of something else. “Hey, do you remember Ms. Karp? What did she specialize in?”

Ms. Carmack got that uncomfortable look other teachers did whenever anyone mentioned Ms. Karp. “Actually—”

“What?”

“I almost forgot. I think she really was one of the rare ones who never specialized. She just always kept a very low control over all four.”

I spent the rest of my afternoon classes thinking about Ms. Carmack’s words, trying to work them into my unified Lissa-Karp-Vladimir theory. I also watched Lissa. So many people wanted to talk to her now that she barely noticed my silence. Every so often, though, I’d see her glance at me and smile, a tired look in her eyes. Laughing and gossiping all day with people she only sort of liked was taking its toll on her.

“The mission’s accomplished,” I told her after school. “We can stop Project Brainwash.”

We sat on benches in the courtyard, and she swung her legs back and forth. “What do you mean?”

“You’ve done it. You stopped people from making my life horrible. You destroyed Mia. You stole Aaron. Play with him for another couple weeks, then drop him and the other royals. You’ll be happier.”

“You don’t think I’m happy now?”

"I know you aren't. Some of the parties are fun, but you hate pretending to be friends with people you don't like—and you don't like most of them. I know how much Xander pissed you off the other night."

"He's a jerk, but I can deal with that. If I stop hanging out with them, everything'll go back to the way it was. Mia will just start up again. This way, she can't bother us."

"It's not worth it if everything else is bothering you."

"Nothing's bothering me." She sounded a little defensive.

"Yeah?" I asked meanly. "Because you're so in love with Aaron? Because you can't wait to have sex with him again?"

She glared at me. "Have I mentioned you can be a huge bitch sometimes?"

I ignored that. "I'm just saying you've got enough shit to worry about without all this. You're burning yourself out with all the compulsion you're using."

"Rose!" She glanced anxiously around. "Be quiet!"

"But it's true. Using it all the time is going to screw with your head. For real."

"Don't you think you're getting carried away?"

"What about Ms. Karp?"

Lissa's expression went very still. "What about her?"

"You. You're just like her."

"No, I'm not!" Outrage flashed in those green eyes.

"She healed too."

Hearing me talk about this shocked her. This topic had weighed us down for so long, but we'd almost never spoken about it.

"That doesn't mean anything."

"You don't think it does? Do you know anyone else who can do that? Or can use compulsion on dhampirs *and* Moroi?"

"She never used compulsion like that," she argued.

"She did. She tried to use it on me the night she left. It started to work, but then they took her away before she finished." Or had they? After all, it was only a month later that Lissa and I had run away from the Academy. I'd always thought that was my own idea, but maybe Ms. Karp's suggestion had been the true force behind it.

Lissa crossed her arms. Her face looked defiant, but her emotions felt uneasy. "Fine. So what? So she's a freak like me. That doesn't mean anything. She went crazy because . . . well, that was just the way she was. That's got nothing to do with anything else."

"But it's not just her," I said slowly. "There's someone else like you guys, too. Someone I found." I hesitated. "You know St. Vladimir. . . ."

And that's when I finally let it all out. I told her everything. I told her about how she, Ms. Karp, and St. Vladimir could all heal and use super-compulsion. Although it made her squirm, I told her how they too grew easily upset and had tried to hurt themselves.

"He tried to kill himself," I said, not meeting her eyes. "And I used to notice marks on Ms. Karp's skin—like she'd claw at her own face. She tried to hide it with her hair, but I could see the old scratches and tell when she made new ones."

"It doesn't mean *anything*," insisted Lissa. "It—it's all a coincidence."

She sounded like she wanted to believe that, and inside, some part of her really did. But there was another part of her, a desperate part of her that had wanted for so long to know that she wasn't a freak, that she wasn't alone. Even if the news was bad, at least now she knew there were others like her.

"Is it a coincidence that neither of them seems to have specialized?"

I recounted my conversation with Ms. Carmack and explained my theory about specializing in all four elements. I also repeated Ms. Carmack's comment about how that would burn someone out.

Lissa rubbed her eyes when I finished, smudging a little of her makeup. She gave me a weak smile. "I don't know what's crazier: what you're actually telling me or the fact that you actually *read* something to find all this out."

I grinned, relieved that she'd actually mustered a joke. "Hey, I know how to read too."

"I know you do. I also know it took you a year to read *The Da Vinci Code*." She laughed.

"That wasn't my fault! And don't try to change the subject."

"I'm not." She smiled, then sighed. "I just don't know what to think about all this."

"There's nothing to think about. Just don't do stuff that'll upset you. Remember coasting through the middle? Go back to that. It's a lot easier on you."

She shook her head. "I can't do that. Not yet."

"Why not? I already told you—" I stopped, wondering why I hadn't caught on before. "It's not just Mia. You're doing all this because you feel like you're *supposed* to. You're still trying to be Andre."

"My parents would have wanted me to—"

"Your parents would have wanted you to be happy."

"It's not that easy, Rose. I can't ignore these people forever. I'm royal too."

"Most of them suck."

"And a lot of them are going to help rule the Moroi. Andre knew that. He wasn't like the others, but he did what he had to do because he knew how important they were."

I leaned back against the bench. "Well, maybe that's the problem. We're deciding who's 'important' based on family alone, so we end up with these screwed-up people making decisions. That's why Moroi numbers are dropping and bitches like Tatiana are queen. Maybe there needs to be a new royal system."

"Come on, Rose. This is the way it is; that's the way it's been for centuries. We have to live with that." I glared. "Okay, how about this?" she continued. "You're worried about me becoming like *them*—like Ms. Karp and St. Vladimir —right? Well, she said I shouldn't use the powers, that it would make things get worse if I did. What if I just stop? Compulsion, healing, everything."

I narrowed my eyes. "You could do that?" The convenient compulsion aside, that was what I'd wanted her to do the whole time. Her depression had started at the same time the powers emerged, just after the accident. I had to believe they were connected, particularly in light of the evidence and Ms. Karp's warnings.

"Yes."

Her face was perfectly composed, her expression serious and steady. With her pale hair woven into a neat French braid and a suede blazer over her dress, she looked like she could have taken her family's place on the council right now.

"You'd have to give up everything," I warned. "No healing, no matter how cute and cuddly the animal. And no more compulsion to dazzle the royals."

She nodded seriously. "I can do it. Will that make you feel better?"

"Yeah, but I'd feel even better if you stopped magic *and* went back to hanging out with Natalie."

"I know, I know. But I can't stop, not now at least."

I couldn't get her to budge on that—*yet*—but knowing that she would avoid using her powers relieved me.

"All right," I said, picking up my backpack. I was late for practice. Again. "You can keep playing with the brat pack, so long as you keep the 'other stuff' in check." I hesitated. "And you know, you really have made your point with Aaron and Mia. You don't have to keep him around to keep hanging out with the royals."

"Why do I keep getting the feeling you don't like him anymore?"

"I like him okay—which is about as much as you like him. And I don't think you should get hot and sweaty with people you only like 'okay.'"

Lissa widened her eyes in pretend astonishment. "Is this Rose Hathaway talking? Have you reformed? Or do *you* have someone you like 'more than okay'?"

"Hey," I said uncomfortably, "I'm just looking out for you. That, and I never noticed how boring Aaron is before."

She scoffed. "You think everyone's boring."

"Christian isn't."

It slipped out before I could stop it. She quit smiling. "He's a *jerk*. He just stopped talking to me for no reason one day." She crossed her arms. "And don't you hate him anyway?"

"I can still hate him and think he's interesting."

But I was also starting to think that I might have made a big mistake about Christian. He was creepy and dark and liked to set people on fire, true. On the other hand, he was smart and funny—in a twisted way—and somehow had a calming effect on Lissa.

But I'd messed it all up. I'd let my anger and jealousy get the best of me and ended up separating them. If I'd let him go to her in the garden that night, maybe she wouldn't have gotten upset and cut herself. Maybe they'd be together now, away from all the school politics.

Fate must have been thinking the same thing, because five minutes after I left Lissa, I passed Christian walking across the quad. Our eyes locked for a moment before we passed each other. I nearly kept walking. Nearly. Taking a deep breath, I came to a stop.

"Wait . . . Christian." I called out to him. Damn, I was so late for training. Dimitri was going to kill me.

Christian spun around to face me, hands stuffed in the pockets of his long black coat, his posture slumped and uncaring.

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for the books." He didn't say anything. "The ones you gave to Mason."

"Oh, I thought you meant the other books."

Smartass. "Aren't you going to ask what they were for?"

"Your business. Just figured you were bored being suspended."

"I'd have to be pretty bored for that."

He didn't laugh at my joke. "What do you want, Rose? I've got places to be."

I knew he was lying, but my sarcasm no longer seemed as funny as usual. "I want you to, uh, hang out with Lissa again."

"Are you *serious*?" He studied me closely, suspicion all over him. "After what you said to me?"

"Yeah, well . . . Didn't Mason tell you? . . ."

Christian's lips turned up into a sneer. "He told me something."

"And?"

"And I don't want to hear it from Mason." His sneer cranked up when I glared. "You sent him to apologize for you. Step up and do it yourself."

"You're a jerk," I informed him.

"Yeah. And you're a liar. I want to see you eat your pride."

"I've been eating my pride for two weeks," I growled.

Shrugging, he turned around and started to walk away.

"Wait!" I called, putting my hand on his shoulder. He stopped and looked back at me. "All right, all right. I lied about how she felt. She never said any of that stuff about you, okay? She *likes* you. I made it up because *I* don't like you."

"And yet you want me to talk to her."

When the next words left my lips, I could barely believe it. "I think . . . you might be . . . good for her."

We stared at each other for several heavy moments. His smirk dried up a little. Not much surprised him. This did.

"I'm sorry. I didn't hear you. Can you repeat that?" he finally asked.

I almost punched him in the face. "Will you stop it already? I want you to hang out with her again."

"No."

"Look, I told you, I lied—"

"It's not that. It's *her*. You think I can talk to her now? She's Princess Lissa again." Venom dripped off his words. "I can't go near her, not when she's surrounded by all those royals."

"You're royal too," I said, more to myself than him. I kept forgetting the Ozeras were one of the twelve families.

"Doesn't mean much in a family full of Strigoi, huh?"

"But *you're* not—wait. That's why she connects to you," I realized with a start.

"Because I'm going to become a Strigoi?" he asked snidely.

"No . . . because you lost your parents too. Both of you saw them die."

"She saw hers die. I saw mine murdered."

I flinched. "I know. I'm sorry. it must have been . . . well, I don't have any idea what it was like."

Those crystal-blue eyes went unfocused. “It was like seeing an army of Death invade my house.”

“You mean . . . your parents?”

He shook his head. “The guardians who came to kill them. I mean, my parents were scary, yeah, but they still looked like my parents—a little paler, I guess. Some red in their eyes. But they walked and talked the same way. I didn’t know anything was wrong with them, but my aunt did. She was watching me when they came for me.”

“Were they going to convert you?” I’d forgotten my original mission here, too caught up in the story. “You were really little.”

“I think they were going to keep me until I was older, then turn me. Aunt Tasha wouldn’t let them take me. They tried to reason with her, convert her too, but when she wouldn’t listen, they tried to take her by force. She fought them—got really messed up—and then the guardians showed up.” His eyes drifted back to me. He smiled, but there was no happiness in it. “Like I said, an army of Death. I think you’re crazy, Rose, but if you turn out like the rest of them, you’re going to be able to do some serious damage one day. Even I won’t mess with you.”

I felt horrible. He’d had a miserable life, and I’d taken away one of the few good things in it. “Christian, I’m sorry for screwing things up between you and Lissa. It was stupid. She wanted to be with you. I think she still does now. If you could just—”

“I told you, I can’t.”

“I’m worried about her. She’s into all this royal stuff because she thinks it’s going to get back at Mia—she’s doing it for me.”

“And you aren’t grateful?” The sarcasm returned.

“I’m worried. She can’t handle playing all these catty political games. It isn’t good for her, but she won’t listen to me. I could . . . I could use help.”

“*She* could use help. Hey, don’t look so surprised—I know there’s something funny going on with her. And I’m not even talking about the wrist thing.”

I jumped. “Did she tell you? . . .” Why not? She’d told him everything else.

“She didn’t need to,” he said. “I’ve got eyes.” I must have looked pathetic, because he sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “Look, if I catch Lissa alone . . . I’ll try to talk to her. But honestly . . . if you really want to help her . . . well, I know I’m supposed to be all anti-establishment, but you might get the best help talking to somebody else. Kirova. Your guardian guy. I don’t know. Someone who knows something. Someone you trust.”

“Lissa wouldn’t like that.” I considered. “Neither would I.”

“Yeah, well, we all have to do things we don’t like. That’s life.”

My snarky switch flipped on. “What are you, an after-school special?”

A ghostly smile flickered across his face. “If you weren’t so psychotic, you’d be fun to hang around.”

“Funny, I feel that way about you too.”

He didn’t say anything else, but the smile grew, and he walked away.

SEVENTEEN

A FEW DAYS LATER, LISSA found me outside the commons and delivered the most astonishing news.

"Uncle Victor's getting Natalie off campus this weekend to go shopping in Missoula. For the dance. They said I could come along."

I didn't say anything. She looked surprised at my silence.

"Isn't that cool?"

"For *you*, I guess. No malls or dances in my future."

She smiled excitedly. "He told Natalie she could bring two other people besides me. I convinced her to bring you and Camille."

I threw up my hands. "Well, thanks, but I'm not even supposed to go to the library after school. No one's going to let me go to Missoula."

"Uncle Victor thinks he can get Headmistress Kirova to let you go. Dimitri's trying too."

"Dimitri?"

"Yeah. He has to go with me if I leave campus." She grinned, taking my interest in Dimitri as interest in the mall. "They figured out my account finally —I got my allowance back. So we can buy other stuff along with dresses. And you know if they let you go to the mall, they'll have to let you go to the dance."

"Do we go to dances now?" I said. We never had before. School-sponsored social events? No way.

"Of course not. But you know there'll be all kinds of secret parties. We'll start at the dance and sneak off." She sighed happily. "Mia's so jealous she can barely stand it."

She went on about all the stores we'd go to, all the things we'd buy. I admit, I was kind of excited at the thought of getting some new clothes, but I doubted I'd actually get this mythical release.

"Oh hey," she said excitedly. "You should see these shoes Camille let me borrow. I never knew we wore the same size. Hang on." She opened her backpack and began rifling through it.

Suddenly, she screamed and threw it down. Books and shoes spilled out. So did a dead dove.

It was one of the pale brown mourning doves that sat on wires along the freeway and under trees on campus. It had so much blood on it that I couldn't figure out where the wound was. Who knew something so small even had that much blood? Regardless, the bird was definitely dead.

Covering her mouth, Lissa stared wordlessly, eyes wide.

"Son of a bitch," I swore. Without hesitating, I grabbed a stick and pushed the little feathered body aside. When it was out of the way, I started shoving her stuff back into the backpack, trying not to think about dead-bird germs. "Why the hell does this keep—Liss!"

I leapt over and grabbed her, pulling her away. She had been kneeling on the ground, with her hand outstretched to the dove. I don't think she'd even realized what she was about to do. The instinct in her was so strong, it acted on its own.

"Lissa," I said, tightening my hand around hers. She was still leaning toward the bird. "Don't. Don't do it."

"I can save it."

"No, you can't. You promised, remember? Some things have to stay dead. Let this one go." Still feeling her tension, I pleaded. "Please, Liss. You promised. No more healings. You said you wouldn't. You promised me."

After a few more moments, I felt her hand relax and her body slump against mine. "I hate this, Rose. I hate all of this."

Natalie walked outside then, oblivious to the gruesome sight awaiting her.

"Hey, do you guys—oh my God!" she squealed, seeing the dove. "What is that?"

I helped Lissa as we rose to our feet. "Another, um, prank."

"Is it . . . dead?" She scrunched up her face in disgust.

"Yes," I said firmly.

Natalie, picking up on our tension, looked between the two of us. "What else is wrong?"

"Nothing." I handed Lissa her backpack. "This is just someone's stupid, sick joke, and I'm going to tell Kirova so they can clean this up."

Natalie turned away, looking a little green. "Why do people keep doing this to you? It's horrible."

Lissa and I exchanged looks.

"I have no idea," I said. Yet as I walked to Kirova's office, I started to wonder.

When we'd found the fox, Lissa had hinted that someone must know about the raven. I hadn't believed that. We'd been alone in the woods that night, and Ms. Karp wouldn't have told anyone. But what if someone actually had seen? What if someone kept doing this not to scare her, but to see if she'd heal again? What had the rabbit note said? *I know what you are*.

I didn't mention any of this to Lissa; I figured there were only so many of my conspiracy theories she could handle. Besides, when I saw her the next day, she'd practically forgotten the dove in light of other news: Kirova had given me permission to go on the trip that weekend. The prospect of shopping can brighten a lot of dark situations—even animal murder—and I put my own worries on hold.

Only, when the time came, I discovered my release came with strings attached.

"Headmistress Kirova thinks you've done well since coming back," Dimitri told me.

"Aside from starting a fight in Mr. Nagy's class?"

“She doesn’t blame you for that. Not entirely. I convinced her you needed a break . . . and that you could use this as a training exercise.”

“Training exercise?”

He gave me a brief explanation as we walked out to meet the others going with us. Victor Dashkov, as sickly as ever, was there with his guardians, and Natalie practically barreled into him. He smiled and gave her a careful hug, one that ended when a coughing fit took over. Natalie’s eyes went wide with concern as she waited for it to pass.

He claimed he was fine to accompany us, and while I admired his resolve, I thought he’d be putting himself through a lot just to shop with a bunch of teenage girls.

We rode out the two-hour trip to Missoula in a large school van, leaving just after sunrise. Many Moroi lived separately from humans, but many also lived among them, and when shopping at their malls, you had to go during their hours. The back windows of the van had tinted glass to filter the light and keep the worst of it away from the vampires.

We had nine people in our group: Lissa, Victor, Natalie, Camille, Dimitri, me, and three other guardians. Two of the guardians, Ben and Spiridon, always traveled with Victor. The third was one of the school’s guardians: Stan, the jerk who’d humiliated me on my first day back.

“Camille and Natalie don’t have personal guardians yet,” Dimitri explained to me. “They’re both under the protection of their families’ guardians. Since they are Academy students leaving campus, a school guardian accompanies them—Stan. I go because I’m Lissa’s assigned guardian. Most girls her age wouldn’t have a personal guardian yet, but circumstances make her unusual.”

I sat in the back of the van with him and Spiridon, so they could dispense guardian wisdom to me as part of the “training exercise.” Ben and Stan sat up front, while the others sat in the middle. Lissa and Victor talked to each other a lot, catching up on news. Camille, raised to be polite among older royals, smiled and nodded along. Natalie, on the other hand, looked left out and kept trying to shift her father’s attention from Lissa. It didn’t work. He’d apparently learned to tune out her chatter.

I turned back to Dimitri. “She’s supposed to have two guardians. Princes and princesses always do.”

Spiridon was Dimitri’s age, with spiky blond hair and a more casual attitude. Despite his Greek name, he had a Southern drawl. “Don’t worry, she’ll have plenty when the time comes. Dimitri’s already one of them. Odds are you’ll be one too. And that’s why you’re here today.”

“The training part,” I guessed.

“Yup. You’re going to be Dimitri’s partner.”

A moment of funny silence fell, probably not noticeable to anyone except Dimitri and me. Our eyes met.

“Guarding partner,” Dimitri clarified unnecessarily, like maybe he too had been thinking of other kinds of partners.

“Yup,” agreed Spiridon.

Oblivious to the tension around him, he went on to explain how guardian pairs worked. It was standard stuff, straight from my textbooks, but it meant more now that I’d be doing it in the real world. Guardians were assigned to

Moroi based on importance. Two was a common grouping, one I'd probably work in a lot with Lissa. One guardian stayed close to the target; the other stood back and kept an eye on the surroundings. Boringly, those holding these positions were called near and far guards.

"You'll probably always be near guard," Dimitri told me. "You're female and the same age as the princess. You can stay close to her without attracting any attention."

"And I can't ever take my eyes off her," I noted. "Or you."

Spiridon laughed again and elbowed Dimitri. "You've got a star student there. Did you give her a stake?"

"No. She's not ready."

"I would be if *someone* would show me how to use one," I argued. I knew every guardian in the van had a stake and a gun concealed on him.

"More to it than just using the stake," said Dimitri in his old-and-wise way. "You've still got to subdue them. And you've got to bring yourself to kill them."

"Why wouldn't I kill them?"

"Most Strigoi used to be Moroi who purposely turned. Sometimes they're Moroi or dhampirs turned by force. It doesn't matter. There's a strong chance you might know one of them. Could you kill someone you used to know?"

This trip was getting less fun by the minute.

"I guess so. I'd have to, right? If it's them or Lissa..."

"You might still hesitate," said Dimitri. "And that hesitation could kill you. And her."

"Then how do you make sure you don't hesitate?"

"You have to keep telling yourself that they *aren't* the same people you knew. They've become something dark and twisted. Something unnatural. You have to let go of attachments and do what's right. If they have any grain of their former selves left, they'll probably be grateful."

"Grateful for me killing them?"

"If someone turned you into a Strigoi, what would you want?" he asked.

I didn't know how to answer that, so I said nothing. Never taking his eyes off me, he kept pushing.

"What would you want if you knew you were going to be converted into a Strigoi against your will? If you knew you would lose all sense of your old morals and understanding of what's right and wrong? If you knew you'd live the rest of your life—your immortal life—killing innocent people? What would you want?"

The van had grown uncomfortably silent. Staring at Dimitri, burdened by all those questions, I suddenly understood why he and I had this weird attraction, good looks aside.

I'd never met anyone else who took being a guardian so seriously, who understand all the life-and-death consequences. Certainly no one my age did yet; Mason hadn't been able to understand why I couldn't relax and drink at the party. Dimitri had said I grasped my duty better than many older guardians, and I didn't get why—especially when they would have seen so much more death and danger. But I knew in that moment that he was right, that I had some weird sense of how life and death and good and evil worked

with each other.

So did he. We might get lonely sometimes. We might have to put our "fun" on hold. We might not be able to live the lives we wanted for ourselves. But that was the way it had to be. We understood each other, understood that we had others to protect. Our lives would never be easy.

And making decisions like this one was part of that.

"If I became Strigoi . . . I'd want someone to kill me."

"So would I," he said quietly. I could tell that he'd had the same flash of realization I'd just had, that same sense of connection between us.

"It reminds me of Mikhail hunting Sonya," murmured Victor thoughtfully.

"Who are Mikhail and Sonya?" asked Lissa.

Victor looked surprised. "Why, I thought you knew. Sonya Karp."

"Sonya Kar . . . you mean, Ms. Karp? What about her?" She looked back and forth between me and her uncle.

"She . . . became Strigoi," I said, not meeting Lissa's eyes. "By choice."

I'd known Lissa would find out some day. It was the final piece of Ms. Karp's saga, a secret I'd kept to myself. A secret that worried me constantly. Lissa's face and bond registered complete and utter shock, growing in intensity when she realized I'd known and never told.

"But I don't know who Mikhail is," I added.

"Mikhail Tanner," said Spiridon.

"Oh. Guardian Tanner. He was here before we left." I frowned. "Why is he chasing Ms. Karp?"

"To kill her," said Dimitri flatly. "They were lovers."

The entire Strigoi thing shifted into new focus for me. Running into a Strigoi I knew during the heat of battle was one thing. Purposely hunting down someone . . . someone I'd loved. Well, I didn't know if I could do that, even if it was technically the right thing.

"Perhaps it is time to talk about something else," said Victor gently. "Today isn't a day to dwell on depressing topics."

I think all of us felt relieved to get to the mall. Shifting into my bodyguard role, I stuck by Lissa's side as we wandered from store to store, looking at all the new styles that were out there. It was nice to be in public again and do to something with her that was just *fun* and didn't involve any of the dark, twisted politics of the Academy. It was almost like old times. I'd missed just hanging out. I'd missed my best friend.

Although it was only just past mid-November, the mall already had glittering holiday decorations up. I decided I had the best job ever. Admittedly, I did feel a little put out when I realized the older guardians got to stay in contact through cool little communication devices. When I protested my lack of one, Dimitri told me I'd learn better without one. If I could handle protecting Lissa the old-fashioned way, I could handle anything.

Victor and Spiridon stayed with us while Dimitri and Ben fanned out, somehow managing not to look like creepy stalker guys watching teenage girls.

"This is so you," said Lissa in Macy's, handing me a low-cut tank top embellished with lace. "I'll buy it for you."

I regarded it longingly, already picturing myself in it. Then, making my

regular eye contact with Dimitri, I shook my head and handed it back. “Winter’s coming. I’d get cold.”

“Never stopped you before.”

Shrugging, she hung it back up. She and Camille tried on a nonstop string of clothes, their massive allowances ensuring that price posed no problem. Lissa offered to buy me anything I wanted. We’d been generous with each other our whole lives, and I didn’t hesitate to take her up on it. My choices surprised her.

“You’ve got three thermal shirts and a hoodie,” she informed me, flipping through a stack of BCBG jeans. “You’ve gone all boring on me.”

“Hey, I don’t see you buying slutty tops.”

“I’m not the one who wears them.”

“Thanks a lot.”

“You know what I mean. You’re even wearing your hair up.”

It was true. I’d taken Dimitri’s advice and wrapped my hair up in a high bun, earning a smile when he’d seen me. If I’d had *molnija* marks, they would have shown.

Glancing around, she made sure none of the others could hear us. The feelings in the bond shifted to something more troubled.

“You knew about Ms. Karp.”

“Yeah. I heard about it a month or so after she left.”

Lissa tossed a pair of embroidered jeans over her arm, not looking at me. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You didn’t need to know.”

“You didn’t think I could handle it?”

I kept my face perfectly blank. As I stared at her, my mind was back in time, back to two years ago. I’d been on day two of my suspension for allegedly destroying Wade’s room when a royal party visited the school. I’d been allowed to attend that reception too but had been under heavy guard to make sure I didn’t “try anything.”

Two guardians escorted me to the commons and talked quietly with each other along the way.

“She killed the doctor attending her and nearly took out half the patients and nurses on her way out.”

“Do they have any idea where she went?”

“No, they’re tracking her . . . but, well, you know how it is.”

“I never expected her to do this. She never seemed like the type.”

“Yeah, well, Sonya was crazy. Did you see how violent she was getting near the end? She was capable of anything.”

I’d been trudging along miserably and jerked my head up.

“Sonya? You mean Ms. Karp?” I asked. “She killed somebody?”

The two guardians exchanged looks. Finally, one said gravely, “She became a Strigoi, Rose.”

I stopped walking and stared. “Ms. Karp? No . . . she wouldn’t have. . . .”

“I’m afraid so,” the other one replied. “But . . . you should keep that to yourself. It’s a tragedy. Don’t make it school gossip.”

I went through the rest of the night in a daze. Ms. Karp. Crazy Karp. She’d killed someone to become Strigoi. I couldn’t believe it.

When the reception ended, I'd managed to sneak off from my guardians and steal a few precious moments with Lissa. The bond had grown strong by now, and I hadn't needed to see her face to know how miserable she was.

"What's wrong?" I asked her. We were in a corner of the hallway, just outside the commons.

Her eyes were blank. I could feel how she had a headache; its pain transferred to me. "I . . . I don't know. I just feel weird. I feel like I'm being followed, like I have to be careful, you know?"

I didn't know what to say. I didn't think she was being followed, but Ms. Karp used to say the same thing. Always paranoid. "It's probably nothing," I said lightly.

"Probably," she agreed. Her eyes suddenly narrowed. "But Wade isn't. He won't shut up about what happened. You can't believe the things he's saying about you."

I could, actually, but I didn't care. "Forget about him. He's nothing."

"I hate him," she said. Her voice was uncharacteristically sharp. "I'm on the committee with him for that fund-raiser, and I *hate* hearing him run his fat mouth every day and seeing him flirt with anything female that walks by. You shouldn't be punished for what he did. He needs to pay."

My mouth went dry. "It's okay . . . I don't care. Calm down, Liss."

"*I* care," she snapped, turning her anger on me. "I wish there was a way I could get back at him. Some way to hurt him like he hurt you." She put her hands behind her back and paced back and forth furiously, her steps hard and purposeful.

The hatred and anger boiled within her. I could feel it in the bond. It felt like a storm, and it scared the hell out of me. Wrapped around it all was an uncertainty, an instability that said Lissa didn't know what to do but that she wanted desperately to do something. Anything. My mind flashed to the night with the baseball bat. And then I thought about Ms. Karp. *She became a Strigoi, Rose.*

It was the scariest moment of my life. Scarier than seeing her in Wade's room. Scarier than seeing her heal that raven. Scarier than my capture by the guardians would be. Because just then, I didn't know my best friend. I didn't know what she was capable of. A year earlier, I would have laughed at anyone who said she'd want to go Strigoi. But a year earlier, I also would have laughed at anyone who said she'd want to cut her wrists or make someone "pay."

In that moment, I suddenly believed she might do the impossible. And I had to make sure she didn't. *Save her. Save her from herself.*

"We're leaving," I said, taking her arm and steering her down the hall. "Right now."

Confusion momentarily replaced her anger. "What do you mean? You want to go to the woods or something?"

I didn't answer. Something in my attitude or words must have startled her, because she didn't question me as I led us out of the commons, cutting across campus toward the parking lot where visitors came. It was filled with cars belonging to tonight's guests. One of them was a large Lincoln Town Car, and I watched as its chauffeur started it up.

“Someone’s leaving early,” I said, peering at him from around a cluster of bushes. I glanced behind us and saw nothing. “They’ll probably be here any minute.”

Lissa caught on. “When you said, ‘We’re leaving,’ you meant . . . no. Rose, we can’t leave the Academy. We’d never get through the wards and checkpoints.”

“We don’t have to,” I said firmly. “He does.”

“But how does that help us?”

I took a deep breath, regretting what I had to say but seeing it as the lesser of evils. “You know how you made Wade do those things?”

She flinched but nodded.

“I need you to do the same thing. Go up to that guy and tell him to hide us in his trunk.”

Shock and fear poured out of her. She didn’t understand, and she was scared. Extremely scared. She’d been scared for weeks now, ever since the healing and the moods and Wade. She was fragile and on the edge of something neither of us understood. But through all of that, she trusted me. She believed I would keep her safe.

“Okay,” she said. She took a few steps toward him, then looked back at me. “Why? Why are we doing this?”

I thought about Lissa’s anger, her desire to do *anything* to get back at Wade. And I thought about Ms. Karp—pretty, unstable Ms. Karp—going Strigoi. “I’m taking care of you,” I said. “You don’t need to know anything else.”

At the mall in Missoula, standing between racks of designer clothes, Lissa asked again, “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You didn’t need to know,” I repeated.

She headed toward the dressing room, still whispering with me. “You’re worried I’m going to lose it. Are you worried I’ll go Strigoi too?”

“No. No way. That was all her. You’d never do that.”

“Even if I was crazy?”

“No,” I said, trying to make a joke. “You’d just shave your head and live with thirty cats.”

Lissa’s feelings grew darker, but she didn’t say anything else. Stopping just outside the dressing room, she pulled a black dress off the rack. She brightened a little.

“This is the dress you were born for. I don’t care how practical you are now.”

Made of silky black material, the dress was strapless and sleek, falling about to the knees. Although it had a slight flair at the hemline, the rest looked like it would definitely manage some serious clinging action. Super sexy. Maybe even challenge-the-school-dress-code sexy.

“That is my dress,” I admitted. I kept staring at it, wanting it so badly that it ached in my chest. This was the kind of dress that changed the world. The kind of dress that started religions.

Lissa pulled out my size. “Try it on.”

I shook my head and started to put it back. “I can’t. It would compromise you. One dress isn’t worth your grisly death.”

“Then we’ll just get it without you trying it on.” She bought the dress.

The afternoon continued, and I found myself growing tired. Always watching and being on guard suddenly became a lot less fun. When we hit our last stop, a jewelry store, I felt kind of glad.

"Here you go," said Lissa, pointing at one of the cases. "The necklace made to go with your dress."

I looked. A thin gold chain with a gold-and-diamond rose pendant. Emphasis on the diamond part.

"I hate rose stuff."

Lissa had always loved getting me rose things—just to see my reaction, I think. When she saw the necklace's price, her smile fell away.

"Oh, look at that. Even you have limits," I teased. "Your crazy spending is stopped at last."

We waited for Victor and Natalie to finish up. He was apparently buying her something, and she looked like she might grow wings and fly away with happiness. I was glad. She'd been dying for his attention. Hopefully he was buying her something extra-expensive to make up for it.

We rode home in tired silence, our sleep schedules all messed up by the daylight trip. Sitting next to Dimitri, I leaned back against the seat and yawned, very aware that our arms were touching. That feeling of closeness and connection burned between us.

"So, I can't ever try on clothes again?" I asked quietly, not wanting to wake up the others. Victor and the guardians were awake, but the girls had fallen asleep.

"When you aren't on duty, you can. You can do it during your time off."

"I don't ever want time off. I want to always take care of Lissa." I yawned again. "Did you see that dress?"

"I saw the dress."

"Did you like it?"

He didn't answer. I took that as a yes.

"Am I going to endanger my reputation if I wear it to the dance?"

When he spoke, I could barely hear him. "You'll endanger the school."

I smiled and fell asleep.

When I woke up, my head rested against his shoulder. That long coat of his —the duster—covered me like a blanket. The van had stopped; we were back at school. I pulled the duster off and climbed out after him, suddenly feeling wide awake and happy. Too bad my freedom was about to end.

"Back to prison," I sighed, walking beside Lissa toward the commons. "Maybe if you fake a heart attack, I can make a break for it."

"Without your clothes?" She handed me a bag, and I swung it around happily. "I can't wait to see the dress."

"Me either. If they let me go. Kirova's still deciding if I've been good enough."

"Show her those boring shirts you bought. She'll go into a coma. I'm about ready to."

I laughed and hopped up onto one of the wooden benches, pacing her as I walked along it. I jumped back down when I reached the end. "They aren't *that* boring."

"I don't know what to think of this new, responsible Rose."

I hopped up onto another bench. “I’m not that responsible.”

“Hey,” called Spiridon. He and the rest of the group trailed behind us. “You’re still on duty. No fun allowed up there.”

“No fun here,” I called back, hearing the laughter in his voice. “I swear—shit.”

I was up on a third bench, near the end of it. My muscles tensed, ready to jump back down. Only when I tried to, my foot didn’t go with me. The wood, at one moment seemingly hard and solid, gave way beneath me, almost as though made of paper. It disintegrated. My foot went through, my ankle getting caught in the hole while the rest of my body tried to go in another direction. The bench held me, swinging my body to the ground while still seizing my foot. My ankle bent in an unnatural direction. I crashed down. I heard a cracking sound that wasn’t the wood. The worst pain of my life shot through my body.

And then I blacked out.

EIGHTEEN

I WOKE UP STARING AT the boring white ceiling of the clinic. A filtered light—soothing to Moroi patients—shone down on me. I felt strange, kind of disoriented, but I didn't hurt.

"Rose."

The voice was like silk on my skin. Gentle. Rich. Turning my head, I met Dimitri's dark eyes. He sat in a chair beside the bed I lay on, his shoulder-length brown hair hanging forward and framing his face.

"Hey," I said, my voice coming out as a croak.

"How do you feel?"

"Weird. Kind of groggy."

"Dr. Olendzki gave you something for the pain—you seemed pretty bad when we brought you in."

"I don't remember that. . . . How long have I been out?"

"A few hours."

"Must have been strong. Must still be strong." Some of the details came back. The bench. My ankle getting caught. I couldn't remember much after that. Feeling hot and cold and then hot again. Tentatively, I tried moving the toes on my healthy foot. "I don't hurt at all."

He shook his head. "No. Because you weren't seriously injured."

The sound of my ankle cracking came back to me. "Are you sure? I remember . . . the way it bent. No. Something must be broken." I manage to sit up, so I could look at my ankle. "Or at least sprained."

He moved forward to stop me. "Be careful. Your ankle might be fine, but you're probably still a little out of it."

I carefully shifted to the edge of the bed and looked down. My jeans were rolled up. The ankle looked a little red, but I had no bruises or serious marks.

"God, I got lucky. If I'd hurt it, it would have put me out of practice for a while."

Smiling, he returned to his chair. "I know. You kept telling me that while I was carrying you. You were very upset."

"You . . . you carried me here?"

"After we broke the bench apart and freed your foot."

Man. I'd missed out on a lot. The only thing better than imagining Dimitri carrying me in his arms was imagining him shirtless while carrying me in his arms.

Then the reality of the situation hit me.

"I was taken down by a bench," I groaned.

"What?"

"I survived the whole day guarding Lissa, and you guys said I did a good job. Then, I get back here and meet my downfall in the form of a bench." Ugh. "Do you know how embarrassing it is? And all those guys saw, too."

"It wasn't your fault," he said. "No one knew the bench was rotted. It looked fine."

"Still. I should have just stuck to the sidewalk like a normal person. The other novices are going to give me shit when I get back."

His lips held back a smile. "Maybe presents will cheer you up."

I sat up straighter. "Presents?"

The smile escaped, and he handed me a small box with a piece of paper.

"This is from Prince Victor."

Surprised that Victor would have given me anything, I read the note. It was just a few lines, hastily scrawled in pen.

> *Rose—*
> *I'm very happy to see you didn't suffer any serious injuries from your fall. Truly, it is a miracle. You lead a charmed life, and Vasilisa is lucky to have you.*

"That's nice of him," I said, opening the box. Then I saw what was inside. "Whoa. Very nice."

It was the rose necklace, the one Lissa had wanted to get me but couldn't afford. I held it up, looping its chain over my hand so the glittering, diamond-covered rose hung free.

"This is pretty extreme for a get-well present," I noted, recalling the price.

"He actually bought it in honor of you doing so well on your first day as an official guardian. He saw you and Lissa looking at it."

"Wow." It was all I could say. "I don't think I did *that* good of a job."

"I do."

Grinning, I placed the necklace back in the box and set it on a nearby table. "You did say 'presents,' right? Like more than one?"

He laughed outright, and the sound wrapped around me like a caress. God, I loved the sound of his laugh. "This is from me."

He handed me a small, plain bag. Puzzled and excited, I opened it up. Lip gloss, the kind I liked. I'd complained to him a number of times how I was running out, but I'd never thought he was paying attention.

"How'd you manage to buy this? I saw you the whole time at the mall."

"Guardian secrets."

"What's this for? For my first day?"

"No," he said simply. "Because I thought it would make you happy."

Without even thinking about it, I leaned forward and hugged him. "Thank you."

Judging from his stiff posture, I'd clearly caught him by surprise. And yeah . . . I'd actually caught myself by surprise, too. But he relaxed a few moments later, and when he reached around and rested his hands on my lower back, I thought I was going to die.

"I'm glad you're better," he said. His mouth sounded like it was almost in my hair, just above my ear. "When I saw you fall ..."

"You thought, 'Wow, she's a loser.'"

"That's not what I thought."

He pulled back slightly, so he could see me better, but we didn't say anything. His eyes were so dark and deep that I wanted to dive right in. Staring at them made me feel warm all over, like they had flames inside. Slowly, carefully, those long fingers of his reached out and traced the edge of my cheekbone, moving up the side of my face. At the first touch of his skin on mine, I shivered. He wound a lock of my hair around one finger, just like he had in the gym.

Swallowing, I dragged my eyes up from his lips. I'd been contemplating what it'd be like to kiss him. The thought both excited and scared me, which was stupid. I'd kissed a lot of guys and never thought much about it. No reason another one—even an older one—should be that big of a deal. Yet the thought of him closing the distance and bringing his lips to mine made the world start spinning.

A soft knock sounded at the door, and I hastily leaned back. Dr. Olendzki stuck her head in. "I thought I heard you talking. How do you feel?"

She walked over and made me lie back down. Touching and bending my ankle, she assessed it for damage and finally shook her head when finished.

"You're lucky. With all the noise you made coming in here, I thought your foot had been amputated. Must have just been shock." She stepped back. "I'd feel better if you sat out from your normal trainings tomorrow, but otherwise, you're good to go."

I breathed a sigh of relief. I didn't remember my hysteria—and was actually kind of embarrassed that I'd thrown such a fit—but I had been right about the problems this would have caused me if I'd broken or sprained it. I couldn't afford to lose any time here; I needed to take my trials and graduate in the spring.

Dr. Olendzki gave me the okay to go and then left the room. Dimitri walked over to another chair and brought me my shoes and coat. Looking at him, I felt a warm flush sweep me as I recalled what had happened before the doctor had entered.

He watched as I slipped one of the shoes on. "You have a guardian angel."

"I don't believe in angels," I told him. "I believe in what I can do for myself."

"Well then, you have an amazing body." I glanced up at him with a questioning look. "For healing, I mean. I heard about the accident. . . ."

He didn't specify which accident it was, but it could be only one. Talking about it normally bothered me, but with him, I felt I could say anything.

"Everyone said I shouldn't have survived," I explained. "Because of where I sat and the way the car hit the tree. Lissa was really the only one in a secure spot. She and I walked away with only a few scratches."

"And you don't believe in angels or miracles."

"Nope. I—"

Truly, it is a miracle. You lead a charmed life. . . .

And just like that, a million thoughts came slamming into my head. Maybe . . . maybe I had a guardian angel after all. . . .

Dimitri immediately noticed the shift in my feelings. "What's wrong?"

Reaching out with my mind, I tried to expand the bond and shake off the lingering effects of the pain medication. Some more of Lissa's feelings came through to me. Anxious. Upset.

"Where's Lissa? Was she here?"

"I don't know where she is. She wouldn't leave your side while I brought you in. She stayed right next the bed, right up until the doctor came in. You calmed down when she sat next to you."

I closed my eyes and felt like I might faint. I had calmed down when Lissa sat next to me because she'd taken the pain away. She'd healed me. . . .

Just as she had the night of the accident.

It all made sense now. I shouldn't have survived. Everyone had said so. Who knew what kind of injuries I'd actually suffered? Internal bleeding. Broken bones. It didn't matter because Lissa had fixed it, just like she'd fixed everything else. That was why she'd been leaning over me when I woke up.

It was also probably why she'd passed out when they took her to the hospital. She'd been exhausted for days afterward. And that was when her depression had begun. It had seemed like a normal reaction after losing her family, but now I wondered if there was more to it, if healing me had played a role.

Opening my mind again, I reached out to her, needing to find her. If she'd healed me, there was no telling what shape she could be in now. Her moods and magic were linked, and this had been a pretty intense show of magic.

The drug was almost gone from my system, and like that, I snapped into her. It was almost easy now. A tidal wave of emotions hit me, worse than when her nightmares engulfed me. I'd never felt such intensity from her before.

She sat in the chapel's attic, crying. She didn't entirely know why she was crying either. She felt happy and relieved that I'd been unharmed, that she'd been able to heal me. At the same time, she felt weak in both body and mind. She burned inside, like she'd lost part of herself. She worried I'd be mad because she'd used her powers. She dreaded going through another school day tomorrow, pretending she liked being with a crowd who had no other interests aside from spending their families' money and making fun of those less beautiful and less popular. She didn't want to go to the dance with Aaron and see him watch her so adoringly—and feel him touching her—when she felt only friendship for him.

Most of these were all normal concerns, but they hit her hard, harder than they would an ordinary person, I thought. She couldn't sort through them or figure out how to fix them.

"You okay?"

She looked up and brushed the hair away from where it stuck to her wet cheeks. Christian stood in the entrance to the attic. She hadn't even heard him come up the stairs. She'd been too lost in her own grief. A flicker of both longing and anger sparked within her.

"I'm fine," she snapped. Sniffling, she tried to stop her tears, not wanting him to see her weak.

Leaning against the wall, he crossed his arms and wore an unreadable expression. "Do . . . do you want to talk?"

"Oh . . ." She laughed harshly. "You want to talk now? After I tried so many times—"

"I didn't want that! That was Rose—"

He cut himself off and I flinched. I was totally busted.

Lissa stood up and strode toward him. "What about Rose?"

"Nothing." His mask of indifference slipped back into place. "Forget it."

"*What about Rose?*" She stepped closer. Even through her anger, she still felt that inexplicable attraction to him. And then she understood. "She *made* you, didn't she? She told you to stop talking to me?"

He stared stonily ahead. "It was probably for the best. I would have just messed things up for you. You wouldn't be where you are now."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"What do you think it means? God. People live or die at your command now, Your Highness."

"You're being kind of melodramatic."

"Am I? All day, I hear people talking about what you're doing and what you're thinking and what you're wearing. Whether you'll approve. Who you like. Who you hate. They're your puppets."

"It's not like that. Besides, I had to do it. To get back at Mia ..."

Rolling his eyes, he looked away from her. "You don't even know what you're getting back at her for."

Lissa's anger flared. "She set up Jesse and Ralf to say those things about Rose! I couldn't let her get away with that."

"Rose is tough. She would have gotten over it."

"You didn't see her," she replied obstinately. "She was crying."

"So? People cry. *You're* crying."

"Not Rose."

He turned back to her, a dark smile curling his lips. "I've never seen anything like you two. Always so worried about each other. I get her thing—some kind of weird guardian hang-up—but you're just the same."

"She's my friend."

"I guess it's that simple. I wouldn't know." He sighed, momentarily thoughtful, then snapped back to sarcastic mode. "Anyway. Mia. So you got back at her over what she did to Rose. But you're missing the point. *Why* did she do it?"

Lissa frowned. "Because she was jealous about me and Aaron—"

"More to it than that, Princess. What did she have to be jealous about? She already had him. She didn't need to attack you to drive that home. She could have just made a big show of being all over him. Sort of like you are now," he added wryly.

"Okay. What else is there, then? Why did she want to ruin my life? I never did anything to her—before all this, I mean."

He leaned forward, crystal-blue eyes boring into hers.

"You're right. You didn't—but your brother did."

Lissa pulled away from him. "You don't know anything about my brother."

"I know he screwed Mia over. Literally."

"Stop it, stop lying."

"I'm not. Swear to God or whoever else you want to believe in. I used to talk

to Mia now and then, back when she was a freshman. She wasn't very popular, but she was smart. Still is. She used to work on a lot of committees with royals—dances and stuff. I don't know all of it. But she got to know your brother on one of those, and they sort of got together."

"They did not. I would have known. Andre would have told me."

"Nope. He didn't tell anyone. He told her not to either. He convinced her it should be some kind of romantic secret when really, he just didn't want any of his friends to find out he was getting naked with a non-royal freshman."

"If Mia told you that, she was making it up," exclaimed Lissa.

"Yeah, well, I don't think she was making it up when I saw her crying. He got tired of her after a few weeks and dumped her. Told her she was too young and that he couldn't really get serious with someone who wasn't from a good family. From what I understand, he wasn't even nice about it either—didn't even bother with the 'let's be friends' stuff."

Lissa pushed herself into Christian's face. "You didn't even *know* Andre! He would never have done that."

"*You* didn't know him. I'm sure he was nice to his baby sister; I'm sure he loved you. But in school, with his friends, he was just as much of a jerk as the rest of the royals. I saw him because I see everything. Easy when no one notices you."

She held back a sob, unsure whether to believe him or not. "So *this* is why Mia hates me?"

"Yup. She hates you because of him. That, and because you're royal and she's insecure around all royals, which is why she worked so hard to claw up the ranks and be their friend. I think it's a coincidence that she ended up with your ex-boyfriend, but now that you're back, that probably made it worse. Between stealing him and spreading those stories about her parents, you guys really picked the best ways to make her suffer. Nice work."

The smallest pang of guilt lurched inside of her. "I still think you're lying."

"I'm a lot of things, but I'm not a liar. That's your department. And Rose's."

"We don't—"

"Exaggerate stories about people's families? Say that you hate me? Pretend to be friends with people you think are stupid? Date a guy you don't like?"

"I like him."

"Like or *like*?"

"Oh, there's a difference?"

"Yes. *Like* is when you date a big, blond moron and laugh at his stupid jokes."

Then, out of nowhere, he leaned forward and kissed her. It was hot and fast and furious, an outpouring of the rage and passion and longing that Christian always kept locked inside of him. Lissa had never been kissed like that, and I felt her respond to it, respond to *him*—how he made her feel so much more alive than Aaron or anyone else could.

Christian pulled back from the kiss but still kept his face next to hers.

"That's what you do with someone you *like*."

Lissa's heart pounded with both anger and desire. "Well, I don't like or *like* you. And I think you and Mia are both lying about Andre. *Aaron* would never make up anything like that."

“That’s because Aaron doesn’t say anything that requires words of more than one syllable.”

She pulled away. “Get out. Get away from me.”

He looked around comically. “You can’t throw me out. We both signed the lease.”

“Get. Out!” she yelled. “I hate you!”

He bowed. “Anything you want, Your Highness.” With a final dark look, he left the attic.

Lissa sank to her knees, letting out the tears she’d held back from him. I could barely make sense out of all the things hurting her. God only knew things upset me—like the Jesse incident—but they didn’t attack me in the same way. They swirled within her, beating at her brain. The stories about Andre. Mia’s hate. Christian’s kiss. Healing me. This, I realized, was what real depression felt like. What madness felt like.

Overcome, drowning in her own pain, Lissa made the only decision she could. The only thing she could do to channel all of these emotions. She opened up her purse and found the tiny razor blade she always carried. . . .

Sickened, yet unable to break away, I felt as she cut her left arm, making perfectly even marks, watching as the blood flowed across her white skin. As always, she avoided veins, but her cuts were deeper this time. The cutting stung horribly, yet in doing it, she was able to focus on the physical pain, distract herself from the mental anguish so that she could feel like she was in control.

Drops of blood splattered onto the dusty floor, and her world began spinning. Seeing her own blood intrigued her. She had taken blood from others her entire life. Me. The feeders. Now, here it was, leaking out. With a nervous giggle, she decided it was funny. Maybe by letting it out, she was giving it back to those she’d stolen it from. Or maybe she was wasting it, wasting the sacred Dragomir blood that everyone obsessed over.

I’d forced my way into her head, and now I couldn’t get out. Her emotions had ensnared me now—they were too strong and too powerful. But I had to escape—I knew it with every ounce of my being. I had to stop her. She was too weak from the healing to lose this much blood. It was time to tell someone.

Breaking out at last, I found myself back in the clinic. Dimitri’s hands were on me, gently shaking me as he said my name over and over in an effort to get my attention. Dr. Olendzki stood beside him, face dark and concerned.

I stared at Dimitri, truly seeing how much he worried and cared about me. Christian had told me to get help, to go to someone I trusted about Lissa. I’d ignored the advice because I didn’t trust anyone except her. But looking at Dimitri now, feeling that sense of understanding we shared, I knew that I did trust someone else.

I felt my voice crack as I spoke. “I know where she is. Lissa. We have to help her.”

NINETEEN

IT'S HARD TO SAY WHAT finally made me do it. I'd held on to my many secrets for so long, doing what I believed best protected Lissa. But hiding her cutting did nothing to protect her. I hadn't been able to make her stop—and really, I now wondered if it was my fault she'd ever started. None of this had happened until she healed me in the accident. What if she'd left me injured? Maybe I would have recovered. Maybe she would be all right today.

I stayed in the clinic while Dimitri went to get Alberta. He hadn't hesitated for a second when I told him where she was. I'd said she was in danger, and he'd left immediately.

Everything after that moved like some sort of slow-motion nightmare. The minutes dragged on while I waited. When he finally returned with an unconscious Lissa, a flurry arose at the clinic, one everyone wanted me kept out of. She had lost a lot of blood, and while they had a feeder on hand right away, rousing her to enough consciousness to drink proved difficult. It wasn't until the middle of the Academy's night that someone decided she was stable enough for me to visit.

"Is it true?" she asked when I walked into the room. She lay on the bed, wrists heavily bandaged. I knew they'd put a lot of blood back into her, but she still looked pale to me. "They said it was you. You told them."

"I had to," I said, afraid to get too close. "Liss . . . you cut yourself worse than you ever have. And after healing me . . . and then everything with Christian . . . you couldn't handle it. You needed help."

She closed her eyes. "Christian. You know about that. Of course you do. You know about everything."

"I'm sorry. I just wanted to help."

"What happened to what Ms. Karp said? About keeping it all secret?"

"She was talking about the other stuff. I don't think she'd want you to keep cutting yourself."

"Did you tell them about the 'other stuff'?"

I shook my head. "Not yet."

She turned toward me, eyes cold. "'Yet.' But you're going to."

"I have to. You can heal other people . . . but it's killing you."

"I healed *you*."

"I would have been okay eventually. The ankle would have healed. It's not worth what it does to you. And I think I know how it started . . . when you first healed me. . . ."

I explained my revelation about the accident and how all of her powers and depression had started after that. I also pointed out how our bond had formed after the accident too, though I didn't fully understand why yet.

"I don't know what's going on, but this is beyond us. We need someone's help."

"They'll take me away," she said flatly. "Like Ms. Karp."

"I think they'll try to help you. They were all really worried. Liss, I'm doing this for you. I just want you to be okay."

She turned away from me. "Get out, Rose."

I did.

They released her the next morning on the condition that she'd have to come back for daily visits to the counselor. Dimitri told me they also planned on putting her on some sort of medication to help with the depression. I wasn't a big fan of pills, but I'd cheer on anything that would help her.

Unfortunately, some sophomore had been in the clinic for an asthma attack. He'd seen her come in with Dimitri and Alberta. He didn't know why she'd been admitted, but that hadn't stopped him from telling people in his hall what he'd seen. They then told others at breakfast. By lunch, all the upperclassmen knew about the late-night clinic visit.

And more importantly, everyone knew she wasn't speaking to me.

Just like that, whatever social headway I'd made plummeted. She didn't outright condemn me, but her silence spoke legions, and people behaved accordingly.

The whole day, I walked around the Academy like a ghost. People watched and occasionally spoke to me, but few made much more effort than that. They followed Lissa's lead, imitating her silence. No one was openly mean to me—they probably didn't want to risk it in case she and I patched things up. Still, I heard "blood whore" whispered here and there when someone thought I wasn't listening.

Mason would have welcomed me to his lunch table, but some of his friends might not have been so nice. I didn't want to be the cause of any fights between him and them. So I chose Natalie instead.

"I heard Lissa tried to run away again, and you stopped her," Natalie said. No one had a clue why she'd been in the clinic yet. I hoped it stayed that way.

Running away? Where in the world had that come from? "Why would she do that?"

"I don't know." She lowered her voice. "Why'd she leave before? It's just what I heard."

That story raged on as the day passed, as did all sorts of rumors about why Lissa might have gone to the med clinic. Pregnancy and abortion theories were eternally popular. Some whispered she might have gotten Victor's disease. No one even came close to guessing the truth.

Leaving our last class as quickly as possible, I was astonished when Mia started walking toward me.

"What do you want?" I demanded. "I can't come out and play today, little girl."

"You sure have an attitude for someone who doesn't exist right now."

"As opposed to you?" I asked. Remembering what Christian had said, I did

feel a little sorry for her. That guilt disappeared after I took one look at her face. She might have been a victim, but now she was a monster. There was a cold, cunning look about her, very different from the desperate and depressed one from the other day. She hadn't stayed beaten after what Andre had done to her—if that was even true, and I believed it was—and I doubted she would with Lissa either. Mia was a survivor.

"She got rid of you, and you're too high and mighty to admit it." Her blue eyes practically bugged out. "Don't you want to get back at her?"

"Are you more psycho than usual? She's my best friend. And why are you still following me?"

Mia *tsk*ed. "She doesn't act like it. Come on, tell me what happened at the clinic. It's something big, isn't it? She really is pregnant, right? Tell me what it is."

"Go away."

"If you tell me, I'll get Jesse and Ralf to say they made all that stuff up."

I stopped walking and spun around to face her. Scared, she took a few steps backward. She must have recalled some of my past threats of physical violence.

"I already know they made it all up, because I didn't *do* any of it. And if you try to turn me against Lissa one more time, the stories are going to be about *you* bleeding, because I'll have ripped your throat out!"

My voice grew louder with each word until I practically shouted. Mia stepped back further, clearly terrified.

"You really are crazy. No wonder she dropped you." She shrugged. "Whatever. I'll find out what's going on without you."

When the dance came that weekend, I decided I really didn't want to go. It had sounded stupid to begin with, and I'd only been interested in going to the after-parties anyway. But without Lissa, I wasn't likely to gain admission to those. Instead, I holed up in my room, trying—and failing—to do some homework. Through the bond, I felt all sorts of mixed emotions from her, particularly anxiety and excitement. It had to be hard hanging out all night with a guy you didn't really like.

About ten minutes after the dance's start time, I decided to clean up and take a shower. When I came back down the hall from the bathroom, a towel wrapped around my head, I saw Mason standing outside my door. He wasn't exactly dressed up, but he also wasn't wearing jeans. It was a start.

"There you are, party girl. I was about ready to give up."

"Did you start another fire? No guys allowed in this hall."

"Whatever. Like that makes a difference." True. The school might be able to keep Strigoi out, but they did a horrible job at keeping the rest of us away from each other. "Let me in. You've got to get ready."

It took me a minute to realize what he meant. "No. I'm not going."

"Come on," he prodded, following me inside. "'Cause you had a fight with Lissa? You guys are going to make up soon. No reason for you to stay here all night. If you don't want to be around her, Eddie's getting a group together over in his room later."

My old, fun-loving spirit perked its head up just a bit. No Lissa. Probably no royals. "Yeah?"

Seeing that he was starting to get me, Mason grinned. Looking at his eyes, I realized again how much he liked me. And again I wondered, Why couldn't I just have a normal boyfriend? Why did I want my hot, older mentor—the mentor I'd probably end up getting fired?

"It'll just be novices," Mason continued, oblivious to my thoughts. "And I have a surprise for you when we get there."

"Is it in a bottle?" If Lissa wanted to ignore me, I had no reason to keep myself sober.

"No, that's at Eddie's. Hurry up and get dressed. I know you aren't wearing that."

I looked down at my ripped jeans and University of Oregon T-shirt. Yeah. Definitely not wearing this.

Fifteen minutes later, we cut across the quad back over to the commons, laughing as we recounted how a particularly clumsy classmate of ours had given himself a black eye in practice this week. Moving quickly over the frozen ground wasn't easy in heels, and he kept grabbing my arm to keep me from falling over, half-dragging me along. It made us laugh that much more. A happy feeling started to well up in me—I wasn't entirely rid of the ache for Lissa, but this was a start. Maybe I didn't have her and her friends, but I had my own friends. It was also very likely that I was going to get head-over-heels drunk tonight, which, while not a great way to solve my problems, would at least be really fun. Yeah. My life could be worse.

Then we ran into Dimitri and Alberta.

They were on their way somewhere else, talking guardian business. Alberta smiled when she saw us, giving us the kind of indulgent look older people always give to younger people who appear to be having fun and acting silly. Like she thought we were cute. The nerve. We stumbled to a halt, and Mason put a hand on my arm to steady me.

"Mr. Ashford, Miss Hathaway. I'm surprised you aren't already in the commons."

Mason gave her an angelic, teacher's-pet smile. "Got delayed, Guardian Petrov. You know how it is with girls. Always got to look perfect. You especially must know all about that."

Normally I would have elbowed him for saying something so stupid, but I was staring at Dimitri and incapable of speech. Perhaps more importantly, he was staring at me too.

I had on the black dress, and it was everything I'd hoped it could be. In fact, it was a wonder Alberta didn't call me on the dress code right there and then. The fabric clung everywhere, and no Moroi girl's chest could have held this dress up. Victor's rose hung around my neck, and I'd done a hasty blow-dry of my hair, leaving it down the way I knew Dimitri liked it. I hadn't worn tights because no one wore tights with dresses like this anymore, so my feet were freezing in the heels. All for the sake of looking good.

And I was pretty sure I looked damn good, but Dimitri's face wasn't giving anything away. He just looked at me—and looked and looked. Maybe that said something about my appearance in and of itself. Remembering how Mason sort of held my hand, I pulled away from him. He and Alberta finished up their joking remarks, and we all went our separate ways.

Music blasted inside the commons when we arrived, white Christmas lights and—ugh—a disco ball casting the only light in the otherwise darkened room. Gyrating bodies, mostly underclassmen, packed the dance floor. Those who were our age stood in too-cool clusters along the edges of the room, waiting for an opportune time to sneak off. An assortment of chaperones, guardians and Moroi teachers alike, patrolled around, breaking up those dancers who did a little too much gyrating.

When I saw Kirova in a sleeveless plaid dress, I turned to Mason and said, "Are you sure we can't hit the hard liquor yet?"

He snickered and took my hand again. "Come on, time for your surprise."

Letting him lead me, I walked across the room, cutting through a cluster of freshmen who looked way too young to be doing the kind of pelvic thrusts they were attempting. Where were the chaperones when you needed them? Then I saw where he was leading me and came to a screeching halt.

"No," I said, not budging when he tugged my hand.

"Come on, it's going to be great."

"You're taking me to Jesse and Ralf. The only way I can *ever* be seen with them is if I've got a blunt object, and I'm aiming between their legs."

He pulled me again. "Not anymore. Come on."

Reluctant, I finally started moving: my worst fears were realized when a few pairs eyes turned our way. Great. Everything was starting all over again. Jesse and Ralf didn't notice us at first, but when they did, an amusing array of expressions played over their faces. First they saw my body and the dress. Testosterone took over as pure male lust shone out of their faces. Then they seemed to realize it was me and promptly turned terrified. Cool.

Mason gave Jesse a sharp poke in the chest with the end of his finger. "All right, Zeklos. Tell her."

Jesse didn't say anything, and Mason repeated the gesture, only harder.

"Tell her."

Not meeting my eyes, Jesse mumbled, "Rose, we know none of that stuff happened."

I almost choked on my own laughter. "*Do* you? Wow. I'm really glad to hear that. Because you see, until you said that, I'd been thinking it *had* happened. Thank God you guys are here to set me straight and tell me what the hell I have or haven't done!"

They flinched, and Mason's light expression darkened to something harder.

"She knows that," he growled. "Tell her the rest."

Jesse sighed. "We did it because Mia told us to."

"And?" prompted Mason.

"And we're sorry."

Mason turned to Ralf. "I want to hear it from you, big boy."

Ralf wouldn't meet my eyes either, but he mumbled something that sounded vaguely like an apology.

Seeing them defeated, Mason turned chipper. "You haven't heard the best part yet."

I cut him a sidelong look. "Yeah? Like the part where we rewind time and none of this ever happened?"

"Next best thing." He tapped Jesse again. "Tell her. Tell her *why* you did it."

Jesse looked up and exchanged uneasy looks with Ralf.

“Boys,” warned Mason, clearly delighted about something, “you’re making Hathaway and me very angry. Tell her why you did it.”

Wearing the look of one who realized things couldn’t get any worse, Jesse finally met my eyes. “We did it because she slept with us. Both of us.”

TWENTY

MY MOUTH DROPPED OPEN. "Uh ... wait ... you mean sex?"

My astonishment prevented me from thinking of a better response. Mason thought it was hysterical. Jesse looked like he wanted to die.

"Of course I mean sex. She said she'd do it if we said that we'd ... you know...."

I made a face. "You guys didn't both, uh, do it at the same time, did you?"

"No," said Jesse in disgust. Ralf kind of looked like he wouldn't have minded.

"God," I muttered, pushing hair out of my face. "I can't believe she hates us that much."

"Hey," exclaimed Jesse, reading into my insinuation. "What's that supposed to mean? We're not that bad. And you and me—we were pretty close to—"

"No. We weren't *even* close to that." Mason laughed again, and something struck me. "If this . . . if this happened back then, though . . . she must have still been dating Aaron."

All three guys nodded.

"Oh. Whoa."

Mia *really* hated us. She'd just moved beyond poor-girl-wronged-by-girl's-brother and well into sociopath territory. She'd slept with these two and cheated on a boyfriend whom she seemed to adore.

Jesse and Ralf looked incredibly relieved when we walked away. Mason slung a lazy arm around my shoulders. "Well? What do you think? I rule, right? You can tell me. I won't mind."

I laughed. "How'd you finally find that out?"

"I called in a lot of favors. Used some threats. The fact that Mia can't retaliate helped too."

I recalled Mia accosting me the other day. I didn't think she was entirely helpless yet but didn't say so.

"They'll start telling people on Monday," he continued. "They promised. Everyone'll know by lunch."

"Why not now?" I asked sulkily. "They slept with a girl. Hurts her more than them."

"Yeah. True. They didn't want to deal with it tonight. You could start telling people if you wanted to. We could make a banner."

With as many times as Mia had called me a slut and a whore? Not a bad idea. "You got any markers and paper? . . ."

My words trailed off as I stared across the gym to where Lissa stood surrounded by admirers, Aaron's arm around her waist. She wore a sleek pink cotton sheath in a shade I never could have pulled off. Her blond hair had been pulled up in a bun that she'd used little crystal hairpins on. It almost looked like she wore a crown. Princess Vasilisa.

The same feelings as earlier hummed through to me, anxiety and excitement. She just couldn't quite enjoy herself tonight.

Watching her from the other side of the room, lurking in the darkness, was Christian. He practically blended into the shadows.

"Stop it," Mason chided me, seeing my stare. "Don't worry about her tonight."

"Hard not to."

"It makes you look all depressed. And you're too hot in that dress to look depressed. Come on, there's Eddie."

He dragged me away, but not before I cast one last glance at Lissa over my shoulder. Our eyes met briefly. Regret flashed through the bond.

But I pushed her out of my head—figuratively speaking—and managed to put on a good face when we joined a group of other novices. We earned a lot of mileage by telling them about the Mia scandal and, petty or not, seeing my name cleared and getting revenge on her felt amazingly good. And as those in our group wandered off and mingled with others, I could see the news spreading and spreading. So much for waiting until Monday.

Whatever. I didn't care. I was actually having a good time. I fell into my old role, happy to see I hadn't grown too dusty in making funny and flirty remarks. Yet, as time passed and Eddie's party grew closer, I started to feel Lissa's anxiety pick up in intensity. Frowning, I stopped talking and turned around, scanning the room for her.

There. She was still with a group of people, still the sun in her little solar system. But Aaron was leaning very close to her, saying something in her ear. A smile I recognized as fake was plastered across her face, and the annoyance and anxiety from her increased further.

Then it spiked. Mia had walked up to them.

Whatever she'd come to say, she didn't waste any time in saying it. With the eyes of Lissa's admirers on her, little Mia in her red dress gestured wildly, mouth working animatedly. I couldn't hear the words from across the room, but the feelings grew darker and darker through the bond.

"I've got to go," I told Mason.

I half walked, half ran over to Lissa's side, catching only the tail end of Mia's tirade. She was yelling at Lissa full force now and leaning into her face. From what I could tell, word must have reached her about Jesse and Ralf selling her out.

"—you and your slutty friend! I'm going to tell everyone what a psycho you are and how they had to lock you in the clinic because you're so crazy. They're putting you on medication. That's why you and Rose left before anyone else could find out you cut—"

Whoa, not good. Just like at our first meeting in the cafeteria, I grabbed her and jerked her away.

"Hey," I said. "Slutty friend here. Remember what I said about standing too

close to her?"

Mia snarled, baring her fangs. As I'd noted before, I couldn't feel too sorry for her anymore. She was dangerous. She had stooped low to get back at me. Now, somehow, she knew about Lissa and the cutting. *Really* knew, too; she wasn't just guessing. The information she had now sounded both like what the guardians on the scene had reported, as well as what I'd told them about Lissa's history. Maybe some confidential doctor's stuff too. Mia'd snagged the records somehow.

Lissa realized it too, and the look on her face—scared and fragile, no more princess—made my decision for me. It didn't matter that Kirova had spoken the other day about giving me my freedom, that I'd been having a good time, and that I could have let my worries go and partied tonight. I was going to ruin everything, right here and right now.

I'm really not good with impulse control.

I punched Mia as hard as I could—harder, I think, than I'd even hit Jesse. I heard a crunch as my fist impacted her nose, and blood spurted out. Someone screamed. Mia shrieked and flew backwards into some squealing girls who didn't want to get blood on their dresses. I swooped in after her, getting in one more good punch before somebody peeled me off her.

I didn't fight restraint as I had when they'd taken me from Mr. Nagy's classroom. I'd expected this as soon as I'd swung at her. Stopping all signs of resistance, I let two guardians lead me out of the dance while Ms. Kirova tried to bring some semblance of order. I didn't care what they did to me. Not anymore. Punish or expel. Whatever. I could handle—

Ahead of us, through the ebbing and flowing waves of students passing through the double doors, I saw a figure in pink dart out. Lissa. My own out-of-control emotions had overridden hers, but there they were, flooding back into me. Devastation. Despair. Everyone knew her secret now. She'd face more than just idle speculation. Pieces would fall together. She couldn't handle that.

Knowing I wasn't going anywhere, I frantically searched for some way to help her. A dark figure caught my eye. "Christian!" I yelled. He'd been staring at Lissa's retreating figure but glanced up at the sound of his name.

One of my escorts shushed me and took my arm. "Be quiet."

I ignored her. "Go after her," I called to Christian. "Hurry."

He just sat there, and I suppressed a groan.

"Go, you idiot!"

My guardians snapped at me to be quiet again, but something inside of Christian woke up. Springing up from his lounging position, he tore off in the direction Lissa had traveled.

No one wanted to deal with me that night. There'd be hell to pay tomorrow—I heard talk of suspension or possibly even expulsion—but Kirova had her hands full with a bleeding Mia and a hysterical student body. The guardians escorted me to my room under the watchful eye of the dorm matron who informed me she'd check on me every hour to make sure I stayed in my room. A couple guardians would also hang out around the dorm's entrances. Apparently I was now a high-security risk. I'd probably just ruined Eddie's party; he'd never sneak a group up to his room now.

Heedless of my dress, I flounced onto the floor of my room, crossing my legs

underneath me. I reached out to Lissa. She was calmer now. The events from the dance still hurt her terribly, but Christian was soothing her somehow, although whether it was through simple words or physical mojo, I couldn't say. I didn't care. So long as she felt better and wouldn't do anything stupid. I returned to myself.

Yes, things were going to get messy now. Mia and Jesse's respective accusations were going to set the school on fire. I probably would get thrown out and have to go live with a bunch of skanky dhampir women. At least Lissa might realize Aaron was boring and that she wanted to be with Christian. But even if that was the right thing, it still meant—

Christian. Christian.

Christian was hurt.

I snapped back into Lissa's body, suddenly sucked in by the terror pounding through her. She was surrounded, surrounded by men and women who had come out of nowhere, bursting up into the attic of the chapel where she and Christian had gone to talk. Christian leapt up, fire flaring from his fingers. One of the invaders hit him on the head with something hard, making his body slump to the ground.

I desperately hoped he was okay, but I couldn't waste any more energy worrying about him. All my fear was for Lissa now. I couldn't let the same thing happen to her. I couldn't let them hurt her. I needed to save her, to get her out of there. But I didn't know how. She was too far away, and I couldn't even escape her head at the moment, let alone run over there or get help.

The attackers approached her, calling her Princess and telling her not to worry, and that they were guardians. And they *did* seem like guardians. Definitely dhampirs. Moving in precise, efficient ways. But I didn't recognize them as any of the guardians from school. Neither did Lissa. Guardians wouldn't have attacked Christian. And guardians certainly wouldn't be binding and gagging her—

Something forced me out of her head, and I frowned, staring around my room. I needed to go back to her and find out what had happened. Usually the connection just faded or I closed it off, but this—this was like something had actually removed me and pulled me. Pulled me back here.

But that made no sense. What could pull me back from . . . wait.

My mind blanked.

I couldn't remember what I'd just been thinking about. It was gone. Like static in my brain. Where had I been? With Lissa? What about Lissa?

Standing up, I wrapped my arms around myself, confused, trying to figure out what was going on. Lissa. Something with Lissa.

Dimitri, a voice inside my head suddenly said. *Go to Dimitri.*

Yes. Dimitri. My body and spirit burned for him all of a sudden, and I wanted to be with him more than I ever had before. I couldn't stay away from him. He'd know what to do. And he'd told me before I should come to him if something was wrong with Lissa. Too bad I couldn't remember what that was. Still. I knew he'd take care of everything.

Getting up to the staff wing of the dorm wasn't hard, since they wanted to keep me inside tonight. I didn't know where his room was, but it didn't matter. *Something* was pulling me to him, urging me closer. An instinct pushed

me toward one of the doors, and I beat the living daylights out of it.

After a few moments, he opened it, brown eyes widening when he saw me.

"Rose?"

"Let me in. It's Lissa."

He immediately stepped aside for me. I'd apparently caught him in bed, because the covers were peeled back on one side and only a small tableside lamp shone in the darkness. Plus, he wore only cotton pajama bottoms; his chest—which I'd never seen before, and wow, did it look great—was bare. The ends of his dark hair curled near his chin and appeared damp, like he'd taken a shower not so long ago.

"What's wrong?"

The sound of his voice thrilled me, and I couldn't answer. I couldn't stop staring at him. The force that had pulled me up here pulled me to him. I wanted him to touch me so badly, so badly I could barely stand it. He was so amazing. So unbelievably gorgeous. I knew somewhere something was wrong, but it didn't seem important. Not when I was with him.

With almost a foot separating us, there was no way I could easily kiss his lips without his help. So instead, I aimed for his chest, wanting to taste that warm, smooth skin.

"Rose!" he exclaimed, stepping back. "What are you doing?"

"What do you think?"

I moved toward him again, needing to touch him and kiss him and do so many other things.

"Are you drunk?" he asked, holding his hand out in a warding gesture.

"Don't I wish." I tried to dodge around him, then paused, momentarily uncertain. "I thought you wanted to—don't you think I'm pretty?" In all the time we'd known each other, in all the time this attraction had built, he'd never told me I was pretty. He'd hinted at it, but that wasn't the same. And despite all the assurances I had from other guys that I was hotness incarnate, I needed to hear it from the one guy I actually wanted.

"Rose, I don't know what's going on, but you need to go back to your room."

When I moved toward him again, he reached out and gripped my wrists. With that touch, an electric current shot through both of us, and I saw him forget whatever he'd just been worrying about. Something seized him too, something that made him suddenly want me as much I wanted him.

Releasing my wrists, he moved his hands up my arms, sliding slowly along my skin. Holding me in his dark, hungry gaze, he pulled me to him, pressing me right up to his body. One of his hands moved up the back of my neck, twining his fingers in my hair and tipping my face up to his. He brought his lips down, barely brushing them against mine.

Swallowing, I asked again, "Do you think I'm pretty?"

He regarded me with utter seriousness, like he always did. "I think you're beautiful."

"Beautiful?"

"You are so beautiful, it hurts me sometimes."

His lips moved to mine, gentle at first, and then hard and hungry. His kiss consumed me. His hands on my arms slid down, down my hips, down to the

edge of my dress. He gathered up the fabric in his hands and began pushing it up my legs. I melted into that touch, into his kiss and the way it burned against my mouth. His hands kept sliding up and up, until he'd pulled the dress over my head and tossed it on the floor.

"You . . . you got rid of that dress fast," I pointed out between heavy breaths. "I thought you liked it."

"I do like it," he said. His breathing was as heavy as mine. "I love it."

And then he took me to the bed.

TWENTY-ONE

I'D NEVER BEEN COMPLETELY NAKED around a guy before. It scared the hell out of me—even though it excited me, too. Lying on the covers, we clung to each other and kept kissing—and kissing and kissing and kissing. His hands and lips took possession of my body, and every touch was like fire on my skin.

After yearning for him for so long, I could barely believe this was happening. And while the physical stuff felt great, I also just liked being close to him. I liked the way he looked at me, like I was the sexiest, most wonderful thing in the world. I liked the way he would say my name in Russian, murmured like a prayer: *Roza, Roza* . . .

And somewhere, somewhere in all of this, was that same urging voice that had driven me up to his room, a voice that didn't sound like my own but that I was powerless to ignore. *Stay with him, stay with him. Don't think about anything else except him. Keep touching him. Forget about everything else.*

I listened—not that I really needed any extra convincing.

The burning in his eyes told me he wanted to do a lot more than we were, but he took things slow, maybe because he knew I was nervous. His pajama pants stayed on. At one point, I shifted so that I hovered over him, my hair hanging around him. He tilted his head slightly, and I just barely caught sight of the back of his neck. I brushed my fingertips over the six tiny marks tattooed there.

"Did you really kill six Strigoi?" He nodded. "Wow."

He brought my own neck down to his mouth and kissed me. His teeth gently grazed my skin, different from a vampire but every bit as thrilling. "Don't worry. You'll have a lot more than me someday."

"Do you feel guilty about it?"

"Hmm?"

"Killing them. You said in the van that it was the right thing to do, but it still bothers you. It's why you go to church, isn't it? I see you there, but you aren't really into the services."

He smiled, surprised and amused I'd guessed another secret about him. "How do you know these things? I'm not guilty exactly . . . just sad sometimes. All of them used to be human or dhampir or Moroi. It's a waste, that's all, but as I said before, it's something I have to do. Something we all have to do. Sometimes it bothers me, and the chapel is a good place to think about those kinds of things. Sometimes I find peace there, but not often. I find more peace with you."

He rolled me off of him and moved on top of me again. The kissing picked up once more, harder this time. More urgent. *Oh God*, I thought. *I'm finally going to do it. This is it. I can feel it.*

He must have seen the decision in my eyes. Smiling, he slid his hands behind my neck and unfastened Victor's necklace. He set it on the bedside table. As soon as the chain left his fingers, I felt like I'd been slapped in the face. I blinked in surprise.

Dimitri must have felt the same way. "What happened?" he asked.

"I—I don't know." I felt like I was trying to wake up, like I'd been asleep for two days. I needed to remember something.

Lissa. Something with Lissa.

My head felt funny. Not pain or dizziness, but . . . the voice, I realized. The voice urging me toward Dimitri was gone. That wasn't to say I didn't want him anymore because hey, seeing him there in those sexy pajama bottoms, with that brown hair spilling over the side of face was pretty fine. But I no longer had that outside influence pushing me to him. Weird.

He frowned, no longer turned on. After several moments of thought, he reached over and picked up the necklace. The instant his fingers touched it, I saw desire sweep over him again. He slid his other hand onto my hip, and suddenly, that burning lust slammed back into me. My stomach went queasy while my skin started to prickle and grow warm again. My breathing became heavy. His lips moved toward mine again.

Some inner part of me fought through.

"Lissa," I whispered, squeezing my eyes shut. "I have to tell you something about Lissa. But I can't . . . remember . . . I feel so strange. . . ."

"I know." Still holding onto me, he rested his cheek against my forehead. "There's something . . . something here. . . ." He pulled his face away, and I opened my eyes. "This necklace. That's the one Prince Victor gave you?"

I nodded and could see the sluggish thought process trying to wake up behind his eyes. Taking a deep breath, he removed his hand from my hip and pushed himself away.

"What are you doing?" I exclaimed. "Come back. . . ."

He looked like he wanted to—very badly—but instead he climbed out of the bed. He and the necklace moved away from me. I felt like he'd ripped part of me away, but at the same time, I had that startling sensation of waking up, like I could think clearly once more without my body making all the decisions.

On the other hand, Dimitri still wore a look of animal passion on him, and it seemed to take a great deal of effort for him to walk across the room. He reached the window and managed to open it one-handed. Cold air blasted in, and I rubbed my hands over my arms for warmth.

"What are you going to—?" The answer hit me, and I sprang out of bed, just as the necklace flew out the window. "No! Do you know how much that must have—?"

The necklace disappeared, and I no longer felt like I was *waking* up. I *was* awake. Painfully, startlingly so.

I took in my surroundings. Dimitri's room. Me naked. The rumpled bed.

But all that was nothing compared to what hit me next.

"Lissa!" I gasped out. It all came back, the memories and the emotions. And,

in fact, her held-back emotions suddenly poured into me—at staggering levels. More terror. Intense terror. Those feelings wanted to suck me back into her body, but I couldn't let them. Not quite yet. I fought against her, needing to stay here. With the words coming out in a rush, I told Dimitri everything that had happened.

He was in motion before I finished, putting on clothes and looking every bit like a badass god. Ordering me to get dressed, he tossed me a sweatshirt with Cyrillic writing on it to wear over the skimpy dress.

I had a hard time following him downstairs; he made no effort to slow for me this time. Calls were made when we got there. Orders shouted. Before long, I ended up in the guardians' main office with him. Kirova and other teachers were there. Most of the campus's guardians. Everyone seemed to speak at once. All the while, I felt Lissa's fear, felt her moving farther and farther away.

I yelled at them to hurry up and do something, but no one except Dimitri would believe my story about her abduction until someone retrieved Christian from the chapel and then verified Lissa really wasn't on campus.

Christian staggered in, supported by two guardians. Dr. Olendzki appeared shortly thereafter, checking him out and wiping blood away from the back of his head.

Finally, I thought, something would happen.

"How many Strigoi were there?" one of the guardians asked me.

"How in the world did they get in?" muttered someone else.

I stared. "Wh—? There weren't any Strigoi."

Several sets of eyes stared at me. "Who else would have taken her?" asked Ms. Kirova primly. "You must have seen it wrong through the . . . vision."

"No. I'm positive. It was . . . they were . . . guardians."

"She's right," mumbled Christian, still under the doctor's ministrations. He winced as she did something to the back of his head. "Guardians."

"That's impossible," someone said.

"They weren't school guardians." I rubbed my forehead, fighting hard to keep from leaving the conversation and going back to Lissa. My irritation grew. "Will you guys get moving? She's getting farther away!"

"You're saying a group of privately retained guardians came in and kidnapped her?" The tone in Kirova's voice implied I was playing some kind of joke.

"Yes," I replied through gritted teeth. "They . . ."

Slowly, carefully, I slipped my mental restraint and flew into Lissa's body. I sat in a car, an expensive car with tinted windows to keep out most of the light. It might be "night" here, but it was full day for the rest of the world. One of the guardians from the chapel drove; another sat beside him in the front—one I recognized. Spiridon. In the back, Lissa sat with tied hands, another guardian beside her, and on the other side—

"They work for Victor Dashkov," I gasped out, focusing back on Kirova and the others. "They're his."

"Prince Victor Dashkov?" asked one of the guardians with a snort. Like there was any other freaking Victor Dashkov.

"Please," I moaned, hands clutching my head. "Do something. They're

getting so far away. They're on . . ." A brief image, seen outside the car window, flared in my vision. "Eighty-three. Headed south."

"Eighty-three already? How long ago did they leave? Why didn't you come sooner?"

My eyes turned anxiously to Dimitri.

"A compulsion spell," he said slowly. "A compulsion spell put into a necklace he gave her. It made her attack me."

"No one can use that kind of compulsion," exclaimed Kirova. "No one's done that in ages."

"Well, someone did. By the time I'd restrained her and taken the necklace, a lot of time had passed," Dimitri continued, face perfectly controlled. No one questioned the story.

Finally, finally, the group moved into action. No one wanted to bring me, but Dimitri insisted when he realized I could lead them to her. Three details of guardians set out in sinister black SUVs. I rode in the first one, sitting in the passenger seat while Dimitri drove. Minutes passed. The only times we spoke was when I gave a report.

"They're still on Eighty-three . . . but their turn is coming. They aren't speeding. They don't want to get pulled over."

He nodded, not looking at me. He most definitely *was* speeding.

Giving him a sidelong glance, I replayed tonight's earlier events. In my mind's eye, I could see it all again, the way he'd looked at me and kissed me.

But what had it been? An illusion? A trick? On the way to the car, he'd told me there really had been a compulsion spell in the necklace, a lust one. I had never heard of such a thing, but when I'd asked for more information, he just said it was a type of magic earth users once practiced but never did anymore.

"They're turning," I said suddenly. "I can't see the road name, but I'll know when we're close."

Dimitri grunted in acknowledgment, and I sank further into my seat.

What had it all meant? Had it meant anything to him? It had definitely meant a lot to me.

"There," I said about twenty minutes later, indicating the rough road Victor's car had turned off on. It was unpaved gravel, and the SUV gave us an edge over his luxury car.

We drove on in silence, the only sound coming from the crunching of the gravel under the tires. Dust kicked up outside the windows, swirling around us.

"They're turning again."

Farther and farther off the main routes they went, and we followed the whole time, led by my instructions. Finally, I felt Victor's car come to a stop.

"They're outside a small cabin," I said. "They're taking her—"

"Why are you doing this? What's going on?"

Lissa. Cringing and scared. Her feelings had pulled me into her.

"Come, child," said Victor, moving into the cabin, unsteady on his cane. One of his guardians held the door open. Another pushed Lissa along and settled her into a chair near a small table inside. It was cold in here, especially in the pink dress. Victor sat across from her. When she started to get up, a guardian gave her a warning look. "Do you think I'd seriously hurt you?"

“What did you do to Christian?” she cried, ignoring the question. “Is he dead?

“The Ozera boy? I didn’t mean for that to happen. We didn’t expect him to be there. We’d hoped to catch you alone, to convince others you’d run away again. We’d made sure rumors already circulated about that.”

We? I recalled how the stories had resurfaced this week . . . from Natalie.

“Now?” He sighed, spreading his hands wide in a helpless gesture. “I don’t know. I doubt anyone will connect it to us, even if they don’t believe you ran away. Rose is the biggest liability. We’d intended to . . . dispatch her, letting others think she’d run away as well. The spectacle she created at your dance made that impossible, but I had another plan in place to make sure she stays occupied for some time . . . probably until tomorrow. We will have to contend with her later.”

He hadn’t counted on Dimitri figuring out the spell. He’d figured we’d be too busy getting it on all night.

“Why?” asked Lissa. “Why are you doing all this?”

His green eyes widened, reminding her of her father’s. They might be distant relatives, but that jade-green color ran in both the Dragomirs and the Dashkovs. “I’m surprised you even have to ask, my dear. I need you. I need you to heal me.”

TWENTY-TWO

"HEAL YOU?"

Heal him? My thoughts echoed hers.

"You're the only way," he said patiently. "The only way to cure this disease. I've been watching you for years, waiting until I was certain."

Lissa shook her head. "I can't . . . no. I can't do anything like that."

"Your healing powers are incredible. No one has any idea just how powerful."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Come now, Vasilisa. I know about the raven—Natalie saw you do it. She'd been following you. And I know how you healed Rose."

She realized the pointlessness of denying it. "That . . . was different. Rose wasn't that hurt. But you . . . I can't do anything about Sandovsky's Syndrome."

"Not *that* hurt?" he laughed. "I'm not talking about her ankle—which was still impressive. I'm talking about the car accident. Because you're right, you know. Rose didn't get 'that hurt.' She *died*."

He let the words sink in.

"That's . . . no. She lived," Lissa finally managed.

"No. Well, yes, she did. But I read all the reports. There was *no way* she should have survived—especially with so many injuries. You healed her. You brought her back." He sighed, half wistful and half weary. "I'd suspected you could do this for so long, and I tried so hard to repeat it . . . to see how much you could control. . . ."

Lissa caught on and gasped. "The *animals*. It was you."

"With Natalie's help."

"Why would you do that? How could you?"

"Because I had to know. I have only a few more weeks to live, Vasilisa. If you can truly bring back the dead, then you can cure Sandovsky's. I had to know before I took you away that you could heal at will and not just in moments of panic."

"Why take me at all?" A spark of anger flared up in her. "You're my near-uncle. If you wanted me to do this—if you really think I can..." Her voice and feelings showed me she didn't really entirely believe she could heal him. "Then why kidnap me? Why didn't you just ask?"

"Because it's not a onetime affair. It took a long time to figure out what you are, but I managed to acquire some of the old histories . . . scrolls kept out of

Moroi museums. When I read about how wielding spirit works—"

"Wielding what?"

"Spirit. It's what you've specialized in."

"I haven't specialized in anything! You're crazy."

"Where else do you think these powers of yours have come from? Spirit is another element, one few people have any more."

Lissa's mind was still reeling from the kidnapping and the possible truth that she'd brought me back from the dead. "That doesn't make any sense. Even if it wasn't common, I still would have heard of another element! Or of someone having it."

"No one knows about spirit anymore. It's been forgotten. When people do specialize in it, nobody realizes it. They think the person simply hasn't specialized at all."

"Look, if you're just trying to make me feel—" She abruptly cut herself off. She was angry and afraid, but behind those emotions, her higher reasoning had been processing what he'd said about spirit users and specializing. It now caught up with her. "Oh my God. Vladimir and Ms. Karp."

He gave her a knowing look. "You've known about this all along."

"No! I swear. It's just something Rose was looking into. . . . She said they were like me. . . ." Lissa was starting to change from a little scared to all scared. The news was too shocking.

"They *are* like you. The books even say Vladimir was 'full of spirit.'" Victor seemed to find that funny. Seeing that smile made me want to slap him.

"I thought . . ." Lissa still wanted him to be wrong. The idea of not specializing was safer than specializing in some freakish element. "I thought that meant, like, the Holy Spirit."

"So does everyone else, but no. It's something else entirely. An element that's within all of us. A master element that can give you indirect control over the others." Apparently my theory about her specializing in all the elements wasn't so far off.

She worked hard to get a grip on this news and her own self-control. "That doesn't answer my question. It doesn't matter if I have this spirit thing or whatever. You didn't have to kidnap me."

"Spirit, as you've seen, can heal physical injuries. Unfortunately, it's only good on acute injuries. Onetime things. Rose's ankle. The accident wounds. For something chronic—say, a genetic disease like Sandovsky's—continual healings are required. Otherwise it will keep coming back. That's what would happen to me. I need you, Vasilisa. I need you to help me fight this and keep it away. So I can live."

"That still doesn't explain why you took me," she argued. "I would have helped you if you'd asked."

"They never would have let you do it. The school. The council. Once they got over the shock of finding a spirit user, they'd get hung up on ethics. After all, how does one choose who gets to be healed? They'd say it wasn't fair. That it was like playing God. Or else they'd worry about the toll it'd take on you."

She flinched, knowing exactly what toll he referred to.

Seeing her expression, he nodded. "Yes. I won't lie to you. It will be hard. It will exhaust you—mentally and physically. But I must do it. I *am* sorry. You'll

be provided with feeders and other entertainments for your services."

She leapt from the chair. Ben immediately stepped forward and pushed her back into it. "And then what? Are you going to just make me a prisoner here? Your own private nurse?"

He made that annoying open-palmed gesture again. "I'm sorry. I have no choice."

White-hot anger blasted away the fear inside of her. She spoke in a low voice. "Yes. *You* don't have the choice, because this is *me* we're talking about."

"It's better for you this way. You know how the others turned out. How Vladimir spent the last of his days stark, raving mad. How Sonya Karp had to be taken away. The trauma you've experienced since the accident comes from more than just your family's loss. It's from using spirit. The accident woke the spirit in you; your fear over seeing Rose dead made it burst out, allowing you to heal her. It forged your bond. And once it's out, you can't put it back. It's a powerful element—but it's also dangerous. Earth users get their power from the earth, air users from the air. But spirit? Where do you think that comes from?"

She glared.

"It comes from you, from your own essence. To heal another, you must give part of yourself. The more you do that, the more it will destroy you over time. You must be noticing that already. I've seen how much certain things upset you, how fragile you are."

"I'm not fragile," snapped Lissa. "And I'm not going to go crazy. I'm going to stop using spirit before things get worse."

He smiled. "Stop using it? You might as well stop breathing. Spirit has its own agenda. . . . You'll always have the urge to help and heal. It's part of you. You resisted the animals, but you didn't think twice about helping Rose. You can't even help compulsion—which spirit also gives you special strength in. And that's how it will always be. You can't avoid spirit. Better to stay here, in isolation, away from further sources of stress. You'd either have become increasingly unstable at the Academy, or they would have put you on some pill that would have made you feel better but stunted your power."

A calm core of confidence settled inside her, one very different from what I'd observed over the last couple of years. "I love you, Uncle Victor, but *I'm* the one who has to deal with that and decide what to do. Not you. You're making me give up my life for yours. That's not fair."

"It's a matter of which life means more. I love you too. Very much. But the Moroi are falling apart. Our numbers are dropping as we let the Strigoi prey upon us. We used to actively seek them out. Now Tatiana and the other leaders hide away. They keep you and your peers isolated. In the old days, you were trained to fight alongside your guardians! You were taught to use magic as a weapon. Not any longer. We wait. We are *victims* ." As he stared off, both Lissa and I could see how caught up in his passion he was. "I would have changed that if I were king. I would have brought about a revolution the likes of which neither Moroi nor Strigoi have ever seen. *I* should have been Tatiana's heir. She was ready to name me before they discovered the disease, and then she would not. If I were cured . . . if I were cured, I could take my rightful place. . . ."

His words triggered something inside of Lissa, a sudden consideration for the state of the Moroi. She'd never contemplated what he'd said, about how different it might be if Moroi and their guardians fought side by side to rid the world of the Strigoi and their evil. It reminded her of Christian and what he'd said about using magic as a weapon too. But even if she did appreciate Victor's convictions, neither of us thought it was worth what he wanted her to do.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I'm sorry for you. But please don't make me do this."

"I have to."

She looked him straight in the eye. "I won't do it."

He inclined his head, and someone stepped forward from the corner. Another Moroi. No one I knew. Walking around behind Lissa, he untied her hands.

"This is Kenneth." Victor held his hands out toward her free ones. "Please, Vasilisa. Take my hands. Send the magic through me just as you did with Rose."

She shook her head. "No."

His voice was less kindly when he spoke again. "Please. One way or another, you will heal me. I'd rather it be on your terms, not ours."

She shook her head again. He made a slight gesture toward Kenneth.

And that's when the pain started.

Lissa screamed. I screamed.

In the SUV, Dimitri's grip on the wheel jerked in surprise, making us veer. Casting me an alarmed look, he started to pull over.

"No, no! Keep going!" I pressed my palms to my temples. "We have to get there!"

From behind my seat, Alberta reached forward and rested a hand on my shoulder. "Rose, what's happening?"

I blinked back tears. "They're torturing her . . . with air. This guy . . . Kenneth . . . he's making it press against her . . . into her head. The pressure's insane. It feels like my—her—skull's gonna explode." I started sobbing.

Dimitri looked at me out of the corner of his eye and pressed the gas pedal down harder.

Kenneth didn't stop with just the physical force of air. He also used it to affect her breathing. Sometimes he'd smother her with it; other times he'd take it all away and leave her gasping. After enduring all that firsthand—and it was bad enough secondhand—I felt pretty confident I would have done anything they wanted.

And finally, she did.

Hurting and bleary-eyed, Lissa took Victor's hands. I'd never been in her head when she worked magic and didn't know what to expect. At first, I felt nothing. Just a sense of concentration. Then . . . it was like . . . I don't even know how to describe it. Color and light and music and life and joy and love . . . so many wonderful things, all the lovely things that make up the world and make it worth living in.

Lissa summoned up all of those things, as many as she could, and sent them into Victor. The magic flowed through both of us, brilliant and sweet. It was

alive. It was her life. And as wonderful as it all felt, she was growing weaker and weaker. But as all of those elements—bound by the mysterious spirit element—flowed into Victor, he grew stronger and stronger.

The change was startling. His skin smoothed, no longer wrinkled and pocked. The gray, thinning hair filled out, turning dark and lustrous once more. The green eyes—still jade-like—sparkled again, turning alert and lively.

He'd become the Victor she remembered from her childhood.

Exhausted, Lissa passed out.

In the SUV, I tried to relate what was happening. Dimitri's face grew darker and darker, and he spat out a string of Russian swear words he *still* hadn't taught me the meanings of.

When we were a quarter mile from the cabin, Alberta made a call on her cell phone, and our whole convoy pulled over. All of the guardians—more than a dozen—got out and stood huddled, planning strategy. Someone went ahead to scout and returned with a report on the number of people inside and outside of the cabin. When the group seemed ready to disperse, I started to get out of the car. Dimitri stopped me.

"No, Roza. You stay here."

"The hell with that. I have to go help her."

He cupped my chin with his hands, fixing me with his eyes. "You have helped her. Your job is done. You did it well. But this isn't any place for you. She and I both need you to stay safe."

Only the realization that arguing would delay the rescue kept me quiet. Swallowing back any protests, I nodded. He nodded back and joined the others. All of them slipped off into the woods, blending with the trees.

Sighing, I kicked the passenger seat back and lay down. I was so tired. Even though the sun poured through the windshield, it was night for me. I'd been up for most of it, and a lot had happened in that time. Between the adrenaline of my own role and sharing Lissa's pain, I could have passed out just like she had.

Except that she was awake now.

Slowly, her perceptions dominated mine once more. She lay on a couch in the cabin. One of Victor's henchmen must have carried her there after she'd fainted. Victor himself—alive and well now, thanks to his abuse of her—stood in the kitchen with the others as they all spoke in low voices about their plans. Only one stood near Lissa, keeping watch. He'd be easy to take down when Dimitri and the Badass Team burst inside.

Lissa studied the lone guardian and then glanced at a window beside the couch. Still dizzy from the healing, she managed to sit up. The guardian turned around, watching her warily. She met his eyes and smiled.

"You're going to stay quiet no matter what I do," she told him. "You aren't going to call for help or tell anyone when I leave. Okay?"

The thrall of compulsion slid over him. He nodded in agreement.

Moving toward the window, she unlocked it and slid the glass up. As she did, a tumble of considerations played through her mind. She was weak. She didn't know how far from the Academy—from anything, really—she was. She had no clue how far she could get before someone noticed.

But she also knew she might not get another chance at escape. She had no

intention of spending the rest of her life in this cabin in the woods.

At any other time, I would have cheered on her boldness, but not this time. Not when all those guardians were about to save her. She needed to stay put. Unfortunately, she couldn't hear my advice.

Lissa climbed out the window, and I swore out loud.

"What? What'd you see?" asked a voice behind me.

I jerked up from my reclining position in the car, banging my head on the ceiling. Glancing behind me, I found Christian peering up from the cargo space behind the farthest back-seats.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"What's it look like? I'm a stowaway."

"Don't you have a concussion or something?"

He shrugged like it didn't matter. What a great pair he and Lissa were. Neither afraid to take on crazy feats while seriously injured. Still, if Kirova had made me stay behind, I would have been right beside him in the back.

"What's happening?" he asked. "Did you see something new?

Hastily, I told him. I also got out of the car as I spoke. He followed.

"She doesn't know our guys are already coming for her. I'm going to go get her before she kills herself with exhaustion."

"What about the guardians? The school's, I mean. Are you going to tell them she's gone?"

I shook my head. "They're probably already busting down the cabin's door. I'm going after her." She was somewhere off to the right side of the cabin. I could head in that direction but wouldn't be able to get very precise until I was much closer to her. Still, it didn't matter. I had to find her. Seeing Christian's face, I couldn't resist giving him a dry smile. "And yeah, I know. You're going with me."

TWENTY-THREE

I'D NEVER HAD SO MUCH trouble staying out of Lissa's head before, but then, we'd never been through anything like this together either. The strength of her thoughts and feelings kept trying to pull me in as I hurried through the forest.

Running through the brush and woods, Christian and I moved farther and farther from the cabin. Man, how I wished Lissa had stayed back there. I would have loved to see the raid through her eyes. But that was behind us now, and as I ran, Dimitri's push on laps and stamina paid off. She wasn't moving very quickly, and I could feel the distance closing between us, giving me a more precise idea of her location. Likewise, Christian couldn't keep up with me. I started to slow for him but soon realized the foolishness of that.

So did he. "Go," he gasped out, waving me on.

When I reached a point close enough to her that I thought she could hear me, I called out her name, hoping to get her to turn around. Instead, what answered me was a set of howls—a soft canine baying.

Psi-hounds. Of course. Victor had said he hunted with them; he could control those beasts. I suddenly understood why no one at school recalled sending psi-hounds after Lissa and me in Chicago. The Academy hadn't arranged that; Victor had.

A minute later, I reached a clearing where Lissa cringed, back against a tree. From her looks and bond feelings, she should have fainted long ago. Only the barest scraps of willpower kept her hanging on. Wide-eyed and pale, she stared in horror at the four psi-hounds cornering her. Noticing the full sunlight, it occurred to me that she and Christian had another obstacle to contend with out here.

"Hey," I yelled at the hounds, trying to draw them toward me. Victor must have sent them to trap her, but I hoped they'd sense and respond to another threat—especially a dhampir. Psi-hounds didn't like us any better than other animals did.

Sure enough, they turned on me, teeth bared and drool coming out of their mouths. They resembled wolves, only with brown fur and eyes that glowed like orange fire. He'd probably ordered them not to harm her, but they had no such instructions regarding me.

Wolves. Just like in science class. What had Ms. Meissner said? A lot of confrontations were all about willpower? Bearing this mind, I tried to project an alpha attitude, but I don't think they fell for it. Any one of them

outweighed me. Oh yeah—they also outnumbered me. No, they didn't have anything to be scared of.

Trying to pretend this was just a free-for-all match with Dimitri, I picked up a branch from the ground that had about the same heft and weight as a baseball bat. I'd just positioned it in my hands when two of the hounds jumped me. Claws and teeth bit into me, but I held my own surprisingly well as I tried to remember everything I'd learned in the last two months about fighting bigger and stronger opponents.

I didn't like hurting them. They reminded me too much of dogs. But it was me or them, and survival instincts won out. One of them I managed to beat to the ground, dead or unconscious I didn't know. The other was still on me, still coming on fast and furious. His companions looked ready to join him, but then a new competitor burst on the scene—sort of. Christian.

"Get out of here," I yelled at him, shaking off my hound as its claws ripped into the bare skin of my leg, nearly toppling me over. I was still wearing the dress, though I'd shed the heels a while ago.

But Christian, like any lovesick guy, didn't listen. He picked up a branch as well and swung it at one of the hounds. Flames burst from the wood. The hound backed up, still compelled to follow Victor's orders, though also clearly afraid of the fire.

Its companion, the fourth hound, circled away from the torch and came up behind Christian. Smart little bastard. It sprang at Christian, hitting him back first. The branch flew from his hands, the fire immediately going out. Both hounds then leapt onto his fallen form. I finished my hound—again feeling sick over what I had to do to subdue it—and moved toward the other two, wondering if I had the strength to take on these last ones.

But I didn't have to. Rescue appeared in the form of Alberta, emerging through some trees.

With a gun in hand, she shot the hounds without hesitation. Boring as hell perhaps—and completely useless against Strigoi—but against other things? Guns were tried and true. The hounds stopped moving and slumped next to Christian's body.

And Christian's body . . .

All three of us made our way over to it—Lissa and I practically crawling. When I saw it, I had to look away. My stomach lurched, and it took a lot of effort not to throw up. He wasn't dead yet, but I didn't think he had much longer.

Lissa's eyes, wide and distraught, drank him in. Tentatively, she reached out toward him and then dropped her hand.

"I can't," she managed in a small voice. "I don't have the strength left."

Alberta, leathery face both hard and compassionate, gently tugged her arm. "Come on, Princess. We need to get out of here. We'll send help."

Turning back to Christian, I forced myself to look at him and let myself feel how much Lissa cared about him.

"Liss," I said hesitantly. She looked over at me, like she'd forgotten I was even there. Wordlessly, I brushed my hair away from my neck and tilted it toward her.

She stared for a moment, blank-faced; then understanding shone in her eyes.

Those fangs that lurked behind her pretty smile bit into my neck, and a small moan escaped my lips. I hadn't realized how much I'd missed it, that sweet, wonderful pain followed by glorious wonder. Bliss settled over me. Dizzying. Joyful. Like being in a dream.

I don't entirely remember how long Lissa drank from me. Probably not that long. She would never even consider drinking the quantities that would kill a person and make her a Strigoi. She finished, and Alberta caught me as I started to sway.

Dizzily, I watched as Lissa leaned over Christian and rested her hands on him. In the distance, I heard the other guardians crashing through the forest.

No glowing or fireworks surrounded the healing. It all took place invisibly, occurring between Lissa and Christian. Even though the bite's endorphins had numbed my connection to her, I remembered Victor's healing and the wonderful colors and music she must be bringing forth.

A miracle unfolded before my eyes, and Alberta gasped. Christian's wounds closed. The blood dried up. Color—as much as a Moroi ever had, at least—returned to his cheeks. His eyelids fluttered, and his eyes regained their life again. Focusing on Lissa, he smiled. It was like watching a Disney movie.

I must have keeled over after that, because I don't remember anything else.

Eventually, I woke up in the Academy's clinic, where they forced fluids and sugar into me for two days. Lissa stayed by my side almost the entire time, and slowly, the events of the kidnapping unfolded.

We had to tell Kirova and a few choice others about Lissa's powers, how she'd healed Victor and Christian and, well, me. The news was shocking, but the administrators agreed to keep it secret from the rest of the school. No one even considered taking Lissa away like they had Ms. Karp.

Mostly all the other students knew was that Victor Dashkov had kidnapped Lissa Dragomir. They didn't know why. Some of his guardians had died when Dimitri's band attacked—a damned shame, when guardian numbers were so low already. Victor was now being held under 24/7 guard at the school, waiting for a royal regiment of guardians to carry him away. The Moroi rulers might be a mostly symbolic government within another country's larger government, but they had systems of justice, and I'd heard about Moroi prisons. Not any place I'd want to be.

As for Natalie . . . that was trickier. She was still a minor, but she'd conspired with her father. She'd brought in the dead animals and kept an eye on Lissa's behavior—even before we left. Being an earth user like Victor, she'd also been the one to rot the bench that broke my ankle. After she'd seen me hold Lissa back from the dove, she and Victor realized that they needed to injure *me* to get to her—it was their only chance to get her to heal again. Natalie had simply waited for a good opportunity. She wasn't locked up or anything yet, and the Academy didn't know what to do with her until a royal command came.

I couldn't help but feel sorry for her. She was so awkward and self-conscious. Anyone could have manipulated her, let alone her father, whom she loved and from whom she so desperately wanted attention. She would have done anything. Rumor said she'd stood screaming outside the detention center, begging them to let her see him. They'd refused and hauled her away.

Meanwhile, Lissa and I slipped back into our friendship like nothing had happened. In the rest of her world, a lot had happened. After all that excitement and drama, she seemed to gain a new sense of what mattered to her. She broke up with Aaron. I'm sure she did it very nicely, but it still had to be hard on him. She'd dropped him twice now. The fact that his last girlfriend had cheated on him probably wasn't helping his confidence any.

And without any more hesitation, Lissa started dating Christian, not caring about the consequences to her reputation. Seeing them out in public, holding hands, made me do a double take. He didn't seem able to believe it himself. The rest of our classmates were almost too stunned to even comprehend it yet. They could barely process acknowledging his existence, let alone him being with someone like her.

My own romantic state was less rosy than hers—if you could even *call* it a romantic state. Dimitri hadn't visited me during my recovery, and our practices were indefinitely suspended. It wasn't until the fourth day after Lissa's kidnapping that I ran into him in the gym. We were alone.

I had come back for my gym bag and froze when I saw him, unable to speak. He started to walk past and then stopped.

"Rose . . ." he began after several uncomfortable moments. "You need to report what happened. With us."

I'd been waiting a long time to talk to him, but this wasn't the conversation I'd imagined.

"I can't do that. They'll fire you. Or worse."

"They should fire me. What I did was wrong."

"You couldn't help it. It was the spell. . . ."

"It doesn't matter. It was wrong. And stupid."

Wrong? Stupid? I bit my lip, and tears threatened to fill my eyes. I quickly tried to regain my composure. "Look, it's not a big deal."

"It *is* a big deal! I took advantage of you."

"No," I said evenly. "You didn't."

There must have been something telling in my voice because he met my eyes with a deep and serious intensity.

"Rose, I'm seven years older than you. In ten years, that won't mean so much, but for now, it's huge. I'm an adult. You're a child."

Ouch. I flinched. Easier if he'd just punched me.

"You didn't seem to think I was a child when you were all over me."

Now he flinched. "Just because your body . . . well, that doesn't make you an adult. We're in two very different places. I've been out in the world. I've been on my own. I've killed, Rose—*people*, not animals. And you . . . you're just starting out. Your life is about homework and clothes and dances."

"That's all you think I care about?"

"No, of course not. Not entirely. But it's all part of your world. You're still growing up and figuring out who you are and what's important. You need to keep doing that. You need to be with boys your own age."

I didn't want boys my own age. But I didn't say that. I didn't say anything.

"Even if you choose not to tell, you need to understand that *it was a mistake*. And it isn't ever going to happen again," he added.

"Because you're too old for me? Because it isn't responsible?"

His face was perfectly blank. “No. Because I’m just not interested in you in that way.”

I stared. The message—the rejection—came through loud and clear. Everything from that night, everything I’d believed so beautiful and full of meaning, turned to dust before my eyes.

“It only happened because of the spell. Do you understand?”

Humiliated and angry, I refused to make a fool of myself by arguing or begging. I just shrugged. “Yeah. Understood.”

I spent the rest of the day sulking, ignoring both Lissa and Mason’s attempts to draw me out of my room. It was ironic that I should want to stay inside. Kirova had been impressed enough by my performance with the rescue to end my house arrest.

Before school the next day, I made my way to where Victor was being held. The Academy had honest-to-goodness cells, complete with bars, and two guardians stood watch in the hallway nearby. It took a little bit of finagling on my part to get them to let me inside to talk to him. Even Natalie wasn’t allowed in. But one of the guardians had ridden with me in the SUV and watched me undergo Lissa’s torture. I told him I needed to ask Victor about what he’d done to Lissa. It was a lie, but the guardians bought it and felt sorry for me. They allowed me five minutes to speak, backing up a discrete distance down the hall where they could see but not hear.

Standing outside Victor’s cell, I couldn’t believe I’d once felt sorry for him. Seeing his new and healthy body enraged me. He sat cross-legged on a narrow bed, reading. When he heard me approach, he looked up.

“Why Rose, what a nice surprise. Your ingenuity never fails to impress me. I didn’t think they’d allow me any visitors.”

I crossed my arms, trying to put on a look of total guardian fierceness. “I want you to break the spell. Finish it off.”

“What do you mean?”

“The spell you did on me and Dimitri.”

“That spell is done. It burned itself out.”

I shook my head. “No. I keep thinking about him. I keep wanting to . . .”

He smiled knowingly when I didn’t finish. “My dear, that was already there, long before I set that up.”

“It wasn’t like this. Not this bad.”

“Maybe not consciously. But everything else . . . the attraction—physical and mental—was already in you. And in him. It wouldn’t have worked otherwise. The spell didn’t really add anything new—it just removed inhibitions and strengthened the feelings you already had for each other.”

“You’re lying. He said he didn’t feel that way about me.”

“*He’s* lying. I tell you, the spell wouldn’t have worked otherwise, and honestly, he should have known better. He had no right to let himself feel that way. You can be forgiven for a schoolgirl’s crush. But him? He should have demonstrated more control in hiding his feelings. Natalie saw it and told me. After just a few observations of my own, it was obvious to me too. It gave me the perfect chance to distract you both. I keyed the necklace’s charm for each of you, and you two did the rest.”

“You’re a sick bastard, doing that to me and him. And to Lissa.”

“I have no regrets about what I did with her,” he declared, leaning against the wall. “I’d do it again if I could. Believe what you want, I love my people. What I wanted to do was in their best interest. Now? Hard to say. They have no leader, no *real* leader. There’s no one worthy, really.” He cocked his head toward me, considering. “Vasilisa actually might have been such a one—if she could ever have found it within herself to believe in something and overcome the influence of spirit. It’s ironic, really. Spirit can shape someone into a leader and also crush her ability to remain one. The fear, depression, and uncertainty take over, and keep her true strength buried deep within her. Still, she has the blood of the Dragomirs, which is no small thing. And of course, she has you, her shadow-kissed guardian. Who knows? She may surprise us yet.”

“‘Shadow-kissed’?” There it was again, the same thing Ms. Karp had called me.

“You’ve been kissed by shadows. You’ve crossed into Death, into the other side, and returned. Do you think something like that doesn’t leave a mark on the soul? You have a greater sense of life and the world—far greater than even I have—even if you don’t realize it. You should have stayed dead. Vasilisa brushed Death to bring you back and bound you to her forever. You were actually in its embrace, and some part of you will always remember that, always fight to cling to life and experience all it has. That’s why you’re so reckless in the things you do. You don’t hold back your feelings, your passion, your anger. It makes you remarkable. It makes you dangerous.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. I was speechless, which he seemed to like.

“It’s what created your bond, too. Her feelings always press out of her, onto others. Most people can’t pick up on them unless she’s actually directing her thoughts toward them with compulsion. You, however, have a mind sensitive to extrasensory forces—hers in particular.” He sighed, almost happily, and I remembered reading that Vladimir had saved Anna from death. That must have made *their* bond, too. “Yes, this ridiculous Academy has no idea what they have in either you or her. If not for the fact that I needed to kill you, I would have made you part of my royal guard when you were older.”

“You never would’ve had a royal guard. Don’t you think people would have been weirded out by you suddenly recovering like that? Even if no one found out about Lissa, Tatiana never would have made you king.”

“You may be right, but it doesn’t matter. There are other ways of taking power. Sometimes it’s necessary to go outside the established channels. Do you think Kenneth is the only Moroi who follows me? The greatest and most powerful revolutions often start very quietly, hidden in the shadows.” He eyed me. “Remember that.”

Odd sounds came from the detention center’s entrance, and I glanced toward where I’d come in. The guardians who had let me in were gone. From around the corner, I heard a few grunts and thumps. I frowned and craned my head to get a better look.

Victor stood up. “Finally.”

Fear spiked down my spine—at least until I saw Natalie round the corner.

Mixed sympathy and anger flitted through me, but I forced a kind smile. She probably wouldn’t see her father again once they took him. Villain or no, they

should be allowed to say goodbye.

"Hey," I said, watching her stride toward me. There was an unusual purpose in her movements that some part of me whispered wasn't right. "I didn't think they'd let you in." Of course, they weren't supposed to have let me in either.

She walked right up to me and—no exaggeration—*launched* me against the far wall. My body hit it hard, and black star-bursts danced across my vision.

"What? . . ." I put a hand to my forehead and tried to get up.

Unconcerned about me now, Natalie unlocked Victor's cell with a set of keys I'd seen on one of the guardian's belts. Staggering to my feet, I approached her.

"What are you doing?"

She glanced up at me, and that's when I saw it. The faint ring of red around her pupils. Skin too pale, even for a Moroi. Blood smudged around her mouth. And most telling of all, the look in her eyes. A look so cold and so evil, my heart nearly came to a standstill. It was a look that said she no longer walked among the living—a look that said she was now one of the Strigoi.

TWENTY-FOUR

IN SPITE OF ALL THE training I'd received, all the lessons on Strigoi habits and how to defend against them, I'd never, ever actually seen one. It was scarier than I'd expected.

This time, when she swung at me again, I was ready. Sort of. I dodged back, slipping out of reach, wondering what chance I had. I remembered Dimitri's joke about the mall. No silver stake. Nothing to cut her head off with. No way to set her on fire. Running seemed like the best option after all, but she was blocking my way.

Feeling useless, I simply backed down the hall as she advanced on me, her movements far more graceful than they'd ever been in life.

Then, also faster than she'd ever moved in life, she leapt out, grabbed me, and slammed my head against the wall. Pain exploded in my skull, and I felt pretty sure that was blood I tasted in the back of my mouth. Frantically, I fought against her, trying to mount some kind of defense, but it was like fighting Dimitri on crack.

"My dear," murmured Victor, "try not to kill her if you don't have to. We might be able to use her later."

Natalie paused in her attack, giving me a moment to back up, but she never took her cold eyes off me. "I'll *try* not to." There was a skeptical tone in her voice. "Get out of here now. I'll meet you there when I'm done."

"I can't believe you!" I yelled after him. "You got your own daughter to turn Strigoi?"

"A last resort. A necessary sacrifice made for the greater good. Natalie understands." He left.

"Do you?" I hoped I could stall her with talking, just like in the movies. I also hoped my questions would hide how utterly and completely terrified I was. "Do you understand? God, Natalie. You . . . you turned. Just because he told you to?"

"My father's a great man," she replied. "He's going to save the Moroi from the Strigoi."

"Are you insane?" I cried. I was backing up again and suddenly hit the wall. My nails dug into it, as though I could dig my way through. "You *are* a Strigoi."

She shrugged, almost seeming like the old Natalie. "I had to do it to get him out of here before the others came. One Strigoi to save all of the Moroi. It's worth it, worth giving up the sun and the magic."

“But you’ll want to kill Moroi! You won’t be able to help it.”

“He’ll help me stay in control. If not, then they’ll have to kill me.” She reached out and grabbed my shoulders, and I shuddered at how casually she talked about her own death. It was almost as casual as the way she was no doubt contemplating *my* death.

“You *are* insane. You can’t love him that much. You can’t really—”

She threw me into a wall again, and as my body collapsed in a heap on the floor, I had a feeling I wouldn’t be getting up this time. Victor had told her not to kill me . . . but there was a look in her eyes, a look that said she wanted to. She wanted to feed off me; the hunger was there. It was the Strigoi way. I shouldn’t have talked to her, I realized. I’d hesitated, just as Dimitri had warned.

And then, suddenly, he was there, charging down the hallway like Death in a cowboy duster.

Natalie spun around. She was fast, so fast. But Dimitri was fast too and avoided her attack, a look of pure power and strength on his face. With an eerie fascination, I watched them move, circling each other like partners in a deadly dance. She was stronger than him, clearly, but she was also a fresh Strigoi. Gaining superpowers doesn’t mean you know how to use them.

Dimitri, however, knew how to use the ones he had. After both giving and receiving some vicious hits, he made his move. The silver stake flashed in his hand like a streak of lightning, then it snaked forward—into her heart. He yanked it out and stepped back, his face impassive as she screamed and fell to the floor. After a few horrible moments, she stopped moving.

Just as quickly, he was leaning over me, slipping his arms under my body. He stood up, carrying me like he had when I hurt my ankle.

“Hey, Comrade,” I murmured, my own voice sounding sleepy. “You were right about Strigoi.” The world started to darken, and my eyelids drooped.

“Rose. Roza. Open your eyes.” I’d never heard his voice so strained, so frantic. “Don’t go to sleep on me. Not yet.”

I squinted up at him as he carried me out of the building, practically running toward the clinic. “Was he right?”

“Who?”

“Victor . . . he said it couldn’t have worked. The necklace.”

I started to drift off, lost in the blackness of my mind, but Dimitri prompted me back to consciousness.

“What do you mean?”

“The spell. Victor said you had to want me . . . to care about me . . . for it to work.” When he didn’t say anything, I tried to grip his shirt, but my fingers were too weak. “Did you? Did you want me?”

His words came out thickly. “Yes, Roza. I did want you. I still do. I wish . . . we could be together.”

“Then why did you lie to me?”

We reached the clinic, and he managed to open the door while still holding me. As soon as he stepped inside, he began yelling for help.

“Why did you lie?” I murmured again.

Still holding me in his arms, he looked down at me. I could hear voices and footsteps getting closer.

“Because we can’t be together.”

“Because of the age thing, right?” I asked. “Because you’re my mentor?”

His fingertip gently wiped away a tear that had escaped down my cheek. “That’s part of it,” he said. “But also . . . well, you and I will both be Lissa’s guardians someday. I need to protect her at all costs. If a pack of Strigoi come, I need to throw my body between them and her.”

“I know that. Of course that’s what you have to do.” The black sparkles were dancing in front of my eyes again. I was fading out.

“No. If I let myself love you, I won’t throw myself in front of her. I’ll throw myself in front of you.”

The medical team arrived and took me out of his arms.

And that was how, two days after being discharged, I ended up back in the clinic. My third time in the two months we’d been back at the Academy. It had to be some kind of record. I definitely had a concussion and probably internal bleeding, but we never really found out. When your best friend is a kick-ass healer, you sort of don’t have to worry about those things.

I still had to stay there for a couple of days, but Lissa—and Christian, her new sidekick—almost never left my side when they weren’t in class. Through them, I learned bits and pieces about the outside world. Dimitri had realized there was a Strigoi on campus when they’d found Natalie’s victim dead and drained of blood: Mr. Nagy of all people. A surprising choice, but since he was older, he’d been able to put up less of a fight. No more Slavic art for us. The guardians in the detention center had been injured but not killed. She’d simply slammed them around as she had me.

Victor had been found and recaptured while trying to escape campus. I was glad, even though it meant Natalie’s sacrifice had been for nothing. Rumors said that Victor hadn’t seemed afraid at all when the royal guards came and carried him away. He’d simply smiled the whole time, like he had some secret they didn’t know about.

Inasmuch as it could, life returned to normal after that. Lissa did no more cutting. The doctor prescribed her something—an anti-depressant or anti-anxiety drug, I couldn’t remember which—that made her feel better. I’d never really known anything about those kinds of pills. I thought they made people silly and happy. But it was a pill like any other, meant to fix something, and mostly it just kept her normal and feeling stable.

Which was a good thing—because she had some other issues to deal with. Like Andre. She’d finally believed Christian’s story, and allowed herself to acknowledge that Andre might not have been the hero she’d always believed him to be. It was hard on her, but she finally reached a peaceful decision, accepting that he could have had both good and bad sides, like we all do. What he’d done to Mia saddened her, but it didn’t change the fact that he’d been a good brother who loved her. Most importantly, it finally freed her from feeling like she needed to be *him* to make her family proud. She could be herself—which she proved daily in her relationship with Christian.

The school still couldn’t get over that. She didn’t care. She laughed it off, ignoring the shocked looks and disdain from the royals who couldn’t believe she’d date someone from a humiliated family. Not all of them felt that way, though. Some who had gotten to know her during her brief social whirlwind

actually liked her for *her*, no compulsion necessary. They liked her honesty and openness, preferring it to the games most royals played.

A lot of royals ignored her, of course, and talked viciously about her behind her back. Most surprising of all, Mia—despite being utterly humiliated—managed to wiggle back into the good graces of a couple of these royals. It proved my point. She wouldn't stay down for long. And, in fact, I saw the first signs of her revenge lurking again when I walked past her one day on the way to class. She stood with a few other people and spoke loudly, clearly wanting me to hear.

"—perfect match. Both of them are from *completely* disgraced and rejected families."

I clenched my teeth and kept walking, following her gaze to where Lissa and Christian stood. They were lost in their own world and formed a gorgeous picture, she blond and fair and he blue-eyed and black-haired. I couldn't help but stare too. Mia was right. Both of their families were disgraced. Tatiana had publicly denounced Lissa, and while no one "blamed" the Ozeras for what had happened to Christian's parents, the rest of the royal Moroi families continued to keep their distance.

But Mia had been right about the other part too. In some ways, Lissa and Christian were perfect for each other. Maybe they were outcasts, but the Dragomirs and Ozeras had once been among the most powerful Moroi leaders. And in only a very short time, Lissa and Christian had started shaping one another in ways that could put them right up there with their ancestors. He was picking up some of her polish and social poise; she was learning to stand up for her passions. The more I watched them, the more I could see an energy and confidence radiating around them.

They weren't going to stay down either.

And I think that, along with Lissa's kindness, may have been what attracted people to her. Our social circle began to steadily grow. Mason joined, of course, and made no secret of his interest in me. Lissa teased me a lot about that, and I didn't yet know what to do about him. Part of me thought maybe it was time to give him a shot as a serious boyfriend, even though the rest of me yearned for Dimitri.

For the most part, Dimitri treated me just like anyone would expect of a mentor. He was efficient. Fond. Strict. Understanding. There was nothing out of the ordinary, nothing that would make anyone suspect what had passed between us—save for an occasional meeting of our eyes. And once I overcame my initial emotional reaction, I knew he was—technically—right about us. Age was a problem, yes, particularly while I was still a student at the Academy. But the other thing he'd mentioned . . . it had never entered my mind. It should have. Two guardians in a relationship could distract each other from the Moroi they were supposed to protect. We couldn't allow that to happen, couldn't risk her life for our own wants. Otherwise, we'd be no better than the Badica guardian who'd run off. I'd told Dimitri once that my own feelings didn't matter. She came first.

I just hoped I could prove it.

"It's too bad about the healing," Lissa told me.

"Hmm?" We sat in her room, pretending to study, but my mind was off

thinking about Dimitri. I'd lectured her about keeping secrets, but I hadn't told her about him or about how close I'd come to losing my virginity. For some reason, I couldn't bring myself to tell.

She dropped the history book she'd been holding. "That I had to give up the healing. And the compulsion." A frown crossed her face at that last part. The healing had been regarded as a wondrous gift in need of further study; the compulsion had met with serious reprimands from Kirova and Ms. Carmack. "I mean, I'm happy now. I should have gotten help a long time ago—you were right about that. I'm glad I'm on the medication. But Victor was right too. I can't use spirit anymore. I can still sense it, though. . . . I miss being able to touch it."

I didn't entirely know what to say. I liked her better like this. Losing that threat of madness had made her whole again, confident and outgoing, just like the Lissa I'd always known and loved. Seeing her now, it was easy to believe what Victor had said about her becoming a leader. She reminded me of her parents and of Andre—how they used to inspire devotion in those who knew them.

"And that's another thing," she continued. "He said I couldn't give it up. He was right. It hurts, not having the magic. I want it so badly sometimes."

"I know," I said. I could feel that ache within her. The pills had dulled her magic, but not our bond.

"And I keep thinking about all the things I could do, all the people I could help." She looked regretful.

"You have to help yourself first," I told her fiercely. "I don't want you getting hurt again. I won't let you."

"I know. Christian says the same thing." She got that dopey smile she always did when she thought about him. If I'd known what idiots being in love would make them, I might not have been so keen to get them back together. "And I guess you guys are right. Better to want the magic and be sane than to have it and be a lunatic. There's no middle ground."

"No," I agreed. "Not with this."

Then, out of nowhere, a thought smacked me in the head. There *was* a middle ground. Natalie's words reminded me of it. *It's worth it, worth giving up the sun and the magic.*

The magic.

Ms. Karp hadn't become Strigoi simply because she'd gone crazy. She'd become Strigoi to stay sane. Becoming Strigoi cut a person completely off from magic. In doing that, she couldn't use it. She couldn't feel it. She wouldn't want it anymore. Staring at Lissa, I felt a knot of worry coil within me. What if she figured that out? Would she want to do it too? No, I quickly decided. Lissa would never do that. She was too strong a person, too moral. And so long as she stayed on the pills, her higher reasoning would keep her from doing something so drastic.

Still, the whole concept prodded me to find out one last thing. The following morning, I went to the chapel and waited in one of the pews until the priest showed up.

"Hello, Rosemarie," he said, clearly surprised. "Can I help you with something?"

I stood up. “I need to know more about St. Vladimir. I read that book you gave me and a couple others.” Best not to tell him about stealing the ones in the attic. “But nobody told how he died. What happened? How did his life end? Was he, like, martyred?”

The priest’s bushy eyebrows rose. “No. He died of old age. Peacefully.”

“You’re sure? He didn’t become Strigoi or kill himself?”

“No, of course not. Why would you think that?”

“Well . . . he was holy and everything, but he was also kind of crazy, right? I read about it. I thought he might have, I don’t know, given into that.”

His face was serious. “It’s true he fought demons—insanity—his whole life. It was a struggle, and he did want to die sometimes. But he overcame it. He didn’t let it defeat him.”

I stared in wonder. Vladimir wouldn’t have had pills, and he’d clearly continued to use magic.

“How? How did he do that?”

“Willpower, I guess. Well . . .” He paused. “That and Anna.”

“Shadow-kissed Anna,” I murmured. “His guardian.”

The priest nodded. “She stayed with him. When he grew weak, she was the one who held him up. She urged him to stay strong and to never give in to his madness.”

I left the chapel in a daze. Anna had done it. Anna had let Vladimir walk that middle ground, helping him to work miracles in the world without meeting a horrible end. Ms. Karp hadn’t been as lucky. She hadn’t had a bound guardian. She hadn’t had anyone to hold her up.

Lissa *did*.

Smiling, I cut across the quadrangle toward the commons. I felt better about life than I had in a very long time. We could do this, Lissa and me. We could do it together.

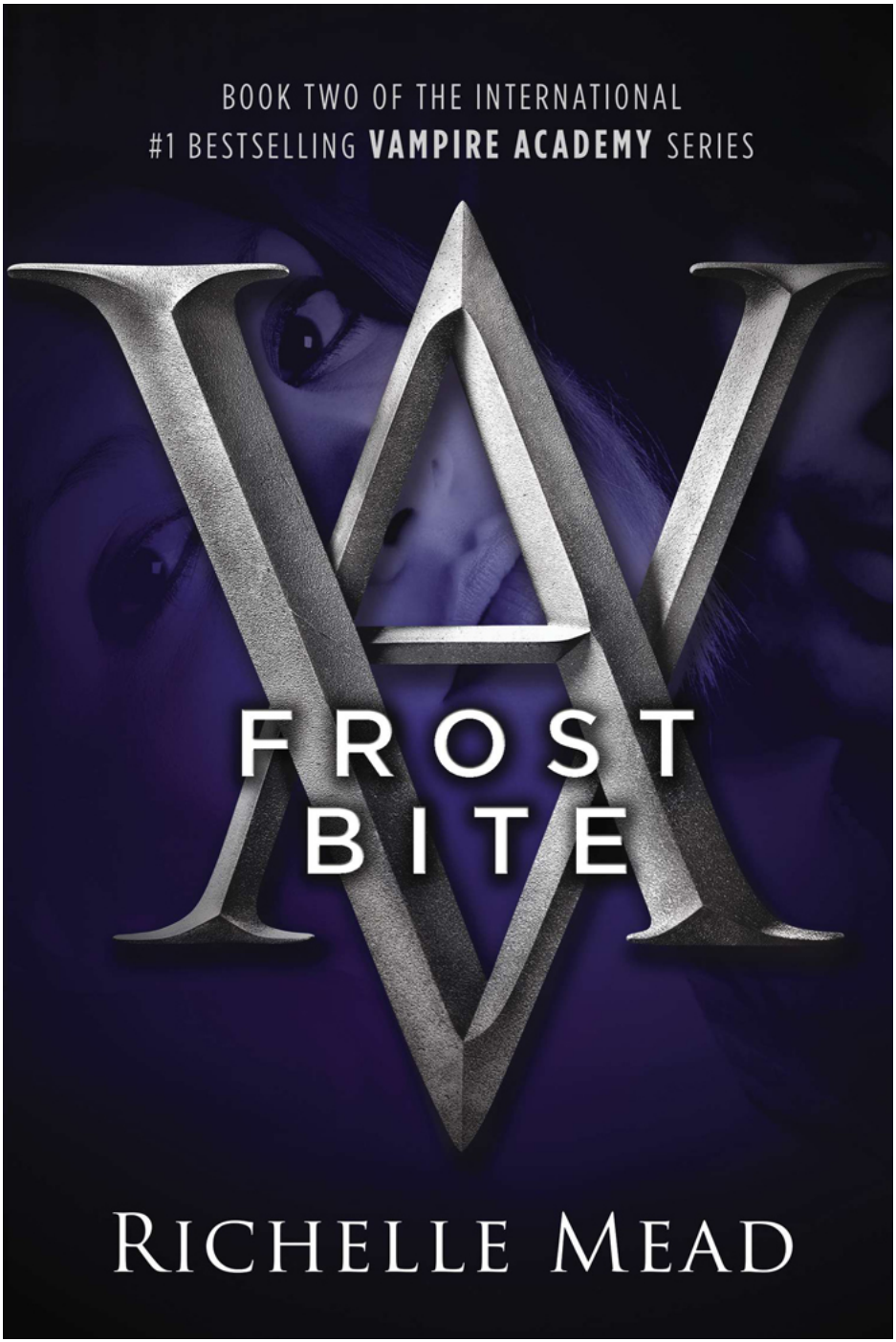
Just then, I saw a dark figure out of the corner of my eye. It swooped past me and landed on a nearby tree. I stopped walking. It was a raven, large and fierce-looking, with shining black feathers.

A moment later, I realized it wasn’t just *a* raven; it was *the* raven. The one Lissa had healed. No other bird would land so close to a dhampir. And no other bird would be looking at me in such an intelligent, familiar way. I couldn’t believe he was still around. A chill ran down my spine, and I started to back up. Then the truth hit me.

“You’re bound to her too, aren’t you?” I asked, fully aware that anyone who saw me would think I was crazy. “She brought you back. You’re shadow-kissed.”

That was actually pretty cool. I held out my arm to it, half hoping it’d come land on me in some sort of dramatic, movie-worthy gesture. All it did was look at me like I was an idiot, spread its wings, and fly off.

I glared as it flew off into the twilight. Then I turned around and headed off to find Lissa. From far away, I heard the sound of cawing, almost like laughter.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For Kat Richardson, who is very wise.

PROLOGUE

THINGS DIE, BUT THEY DON'T always stay dead. Believe me, I know.

There's a race of vampires on this earth who are literally the walking dead. They're called Strigoi, and if you're not already having nightmares about them, you should be. They're strong, they're fast, and they kill without mercy or hesitation. They're immortal, too—which kind of makes them a bitch to destroy. There are only three ways to do it: a silver stake through the heart, decapitation, and setting them on fire. None of those is easy to pull off, but it's better than having no options at all.

There are also good vampires walking the world. They're called Moroi. They're alive, and they possess the incredibly cool power to wield magic in each of the four elements— earth, air, water, and fire. (Well, *most* Moroi can do this—but I'll explain more about the exceptions later). They don't really use the magic for much anymore, which is kind of sad. It'd be a great weapon, but the Moroi strongly believe magic should only be used peacefully. It's one of the biggest rules in their society. Moroi are also usually tall and slim, and they can't handle a lot of sunlight. But they do have superhuman senses that make up for it: sight, smell, and hearing.

Both kinds of vampires need blood. That's what makes them vampires, I guess. Moroi don't kill to take it, however. Instead, they keep humans around who willingly donate small amounts. They volunteer because vampire bites contain endorphins that feel really, really good and can become addictive. I know this from personal experience. These humans are called feeders and are essentially vampire-bite junkies.

Still, keeping feeders around is better than the way the Strigoi do things, because, as you might expect, they kill for their blood. I think they like it. If a Moroi kills a victim while drinking, he or she will turn into a Strigoi. Some Moroi do this by choice, giving up their magic and their morals for immortality. Strigoi can also be created by force. If a Strigoi drinks blood from a victim and then makes that person drink Strigoi blood in return, well . . . you get a new Strigoi. This can happen to anyone: Moroi, human, or . . . dhampir.

Dhampir.

That's what I am. Dhampirs are half-human, half-Moroi. I like to think we got the best traits of both races. I'm strong and sturdy, like humans are. I can also go out in the sun as much as I want. But, like the Moroi, I have really good senses and fast reflexes. The result is that dhampirs make the ultimate bodyguards—which is what most of us are. We're called guardians.

I've spent my entire life training to protect Moroi from Strigoi. I have a whole set of special classes and practices I take at St. Vladimir's Academy, a private

school for Moroi and dhampirs. I know how to use all sorts of weapons and can land some pretty mean kicks. I've beaten up guys twice my size—both in and out of class. And really, *guys* are pretty much the only ones I beat up, since there are very few girls in any of my classes.

Because while dhampirs inherit all sorts of great traits, there's one thing we didn't get. Dhampirs can't have children with other dhampirs. Don't ask me why. It's not like I'm a geneticist or anything. Humans and Moroi getting together will always make more dhampirs; that's where we came from in the first place. But that doesn't happen so much anymore; Moroi tend to stay away from humans. Through another weird genetic fluke, however, Moroi and dhampirs mixing will create dhampir children. I know, I know: it's crazy. You'd think you'd get a baby that's three-quarters vampire, right? Nope. Half human, half Moroi.

Most of these dhampirs are born from Moroi men and dhampir women getting together. Moroi women stick to having Moroi babies. What this usually means is that Moroi men have flings with dhampir women and then take off. This leaves a lot of single dhampir mothers, and that's why not as many of them become guardians. They'd rather focus on raising their children.

As a result, only the guys and a handful of girls are left to become guardians. But those who choose to protect Moroi are serious about their jobs. Dhampirs need Moroi to keep having kids. We *have* to protect them. Plus, it's just . . . well, it's the honorable thing to do. Strigoi are evil and unnatural. It isn't right for them to prey on the innocent. Dhampirs who train to be guardians have this drilled into them from the time they can walk. Strigoi are evil. Moroi must be protected. Guardians believe this. I believe this.

And there's one Moroi I want to protect more than anyone in the world: my best friend, Lissa. She's a Moroi princess. The Moroi have twelve royal families, and she's the only one left in hers—the Dragomirs. But there's something else that makes Lissa special, aside from her being my best friend.

Remember when I said every Moroi wields one of the four elements? Well, it turns out Lissa wields one no one even knew existed until recently: spirit. For years, we thought she just wasn't going to develop her magical abilities. Then strange things started happening around her. For example, all vampires have an ability called compulsion that lets them force their will on others. Strigoi have it really strongly. It's weaker in Moroi, and it's also forbidden. Lissa, however, has it almost as much as a Strigoi. She can bat her eyelashes, and people will do what she wants.

But that's not even the coolest thing she can do.

I said earlier that dead things don't always stay dead. Well, I'm one of them. Don't worry—I'm not like the Strigoi. But I did die once. (I don't recommend it.) It happened when the car I was riding in slid off the road. The accident killed me, Lissa's parents, and her brother. Yet, somewhere in the chaos—without even realizing it—Lissa used spirit to bring me back. We didn't know about this for a long time. In fact, we didn't even know spirit existed at all.

Unfortunately, it turned out that *one* person did know about spirit before we did. Victor Dashkov, a dying Moroi prince, found out about Lissa's powers and decided he wanted to lock her up and make her his own personal healer—for the rest of her life. When I realized someone was stalking her, I decided to take matters into my own hands. I broke us out of school to run off and live among

humans. It was fun—but also kind of nerve-wracking—to always be on the run. We got away with this for two years until the authorities at St. Vladimir's hunted us down and dragged us back a few months ago.

That was when Victor made his real move, kidnapping her and torturing her until she gave into his demands. In the process, he took some pretty extreme measures—like zapping me and Dimitri, my mentor, with a lust spell. (I'll get to *him* later). Victor also exploited the way spirit was starting to make Lissa mentally unstable. But even that wasn't as bad as what he did to his own daughter Natalie. He went so far as to encourage her to turn into a Strigoi to help cover his escape. She ended up getting staked. Even when captured after the fact, Victor didn't seem to display too much guilt over what he'd asked her to do. Makes me think I wasn't missing out on growing up without a father.

Still, I now have to protect Lissa from Strigoi *and* Moroi. Only a few officials know about what she can do, but I'm sure there are other Victors out there who would want to use her. Fortunately, I have an extra weapon to help me guard her. Somewhere during my healing in the car accident, spirit forged a psychic bond between her and me. I can see and feel what she experiences. (It only works one way, though. She can't "feel" me.) The bond helps me keep an eye on her and know when she's in trouble, although sometimes, it's weird having another person inside your head. We're pretty sure there are lots of other things spirit can do, but we don't know what they are yet.

In the meantime, I'm trying to be the best guardian I can be. Running away put me behind in my training, so I have to take extra classes to make up for lost time. There's nothing in the world I want more than to keep Lissa safe. Unfortunately, I've got two things that complicate my training now and then. One is that I sometimes act before I think. I'm getting better at avoiding this, but when something sets me off, I tend to punch first and then find out who I actually hit later. When it comes to those I care about being in danger . . . well, rules seem optional.

The other problem in my life is Dimitri. He's the one who killed Natalie, and he's a total badass. He's also pretty good-looking. Okay—more than good-looking. He's hot—like, the kind of hot that makes you stop walking on the street and get hit by traffic. But, like I said, he's my instructor. *And* he's twenty-four. Both of those are reasons why I shouldn't have fallen for him. But, honestly, the most important reason is that he and I will be Lissa's guardians when she graduates. If he and I are checking each other out, then that means we aren't looking out for her.

I haven't had much luck in getting over him, and I'm pretty sure he still feels the same about me. Part of what makes it so difficult is that he and I got pretty hot and heavy when we got hit with the lust spell. Victor had wanted to distract us while he kidnapped Lissa, and it had worked. I'd been ready to give up my virginity, and Dimitri had been ready to take it. At the last minute, we broke the spell, but those memories are always with me and make it kind of hard to focus on combat moves sometimes.

By the way, my name's Rose Hathaway. I'm seventeen years old, training to protect *and* kill vampires, in love with a completely unsuitable guy, and have a best friend whose weird magic could drive her crazy.

Hey, no one said high school was easy.

ONE

I DIDN'T THINK MY DAY COULD get any worse until my best friend told me she might be going crazy. Again.

"I . . . what did you say?"

I stood in the lobby of her dorm, leaning over one of my boots and adjusting it. Jerking my head up, I peered at her through the tangle of dark hair covering half my face. I'd fallen asleep after school and had skipped using a hairbrush in order to make it out the door on time. Lissa's platinum blond hair was smooth and perfect, of course, hanging over her shoulders like a bridal veil as she watched me with amusement.

"I said that I think my pills might not be working as well anymore."

I straightened up and shook the hair out of my face. "What does that mean?" I asked. Around us, Moroi hurried past, on their way to meet friends or go to dinner.

"Have you started . . ." I lowered my voice. "Have you started getting your powers back?"

She shook her head, and I saw a small flash of regret in her eyes. "No . . . I feel *closer* to the magic, but I still can't use it. Mostly what I'm noticing lately is a little of the other stuff, you know. . . . I'm getting more depressed now and then. Nothing even *close* to what it used to be," she added hastily, seeing my face. Before she'd gone on her pills, Lissa's moods could get so low that she cut herself. "It's just there a little more than it was."

"What about the other things you used to get? Anxiety? Delusional thinking?"

Lissa laughed, not taking any of this as seriously as I was. "You sound like you've been reading psychiatry textbooks."

I actually *had* been reading them. "I'm just worried about you. If you think the pills aren't working anymore, we need to tell someone."

"No, no," she said hastily. "I'm fine, really. They're still working . . . just not quite as much. I don't think we should panic yet. Especially you—not today, at least."

Her change in subject worked. I'd found out an hour ago that I would be taking my Qualifier today. It was an exam—or rather, an interview—all novice guardians were required to pass during junior year at St. Vladimir's Academy. Since I'd been off hiding Lissa last year, I'd missed mine. Today I was being taken to a guardian somewhere off-campus who would administer the test to me. Thanks for the notice, guys.

“Don’t worry about me,” Lissa repeated, smiling. “I’ll let you know if it gets worse.”

“Okay,” I said reluctantly.

Just to be safe, though, I opened my senses and allowed myself to truly feel her through our psychic bond. She had been telling the truth. She was calm and happy this morning, nothing to worry about. But, far back in her mind, I sensed a knot of dark, uneasy feelings. It wasn’t consuming her or anything, but it had the same feel as the bouts of depression and anger she used to get. It was only a trickle, but I didn’t like it. I didn’t want it there at all. I tried pushing farther inside her to get a better feel for the emotions and suddenly had the weird experience of touching. A sickening sort of feeling seized me, and I jerked out of her head. A small shudder ran through my body.

“You okay?” Lissa asked, frowning. “You look nauseous all of a sudden.”

“Just . . . nervous for the test,” I lied. Hesitantly, I reached out through the bond again. The darkness had completely disappeared. No trace. Maybe there was nothing wrong with her pills after all. “I’m fine.”

She pointed at a clock. “You won’t be if you don’t get moving soon.”

“Damn it,” I swore. She was right. I gave her a quick hug. “See you later!”

“Good luck!” she called.

I hurried off across campus and found my mentor, Dimitri Belikov, waiting beside a Honda Pilot. How boring. I supposed I couldn’t have expected us to navigate Montana mountain roads in a Porsche, but it would have been nice to have something cooler.

“I know, I know,” I said, seeing his face. “Sorry I’m late.”

I remembered then that I had one of the most important tests of my life coming up, and suddenly, I forgot all about Lissa and her pills possibly not working. I wanted to protect her, but that wouldn’t mean much if I couldn’t pass high school and actually become her guardian.

Dimitri stood there, looking as gorgeous as ever. The massive, brick building cast long shadows over us, looming like some great beast in the dusky predawn light. Around us, snow was just beginning to fall. I watched the light, crystalline flakes drift gently down. Several landed and promptly melted in his dark hair.

“Who else is going?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Just you and me.”

My mood promptly shot up past “cheerful” and went straight to “ecstatic.” Me and Dimitri. Alone. In a car. This might very well be worth a surprise test.

“How far away is it?” Silently, I begged for it to be a really long drive. Like, one that would take a week. And would involve us staying overnight in luxury hotels. Maybe we’d get stranded in a snowbank, and only body heat would keep us alive.

“Five hours.”

“Oh.”

A bit less than I’d hoped for. Still, five hours was better than nothing. It didn’t rule out the snowbank possibility, either.

The dim, snowy roads would have been difficult for humans to navigate, but they proved no problem for our dhampir eyes. I stared ahead, trying not to think about how Dimitri’s aftershave filled the car with a clean, sharp scent that made me want to melt. Instead, I tried to focus on the Qualifier again.

It wasn’t the kind of thing you could study for. You either passed it or you

didn't. High-up guardians visited novices during their junior year and met individually to discuss students' commitment to being guardians. I didn't know exactly what was asked, but rumors had trickled down over the years. The older guardians assessed character and dedication, and some novices had been deemed unfit to continue down the guardian path.

"Don't they usually come to the Academy?" I asked Dimitri. "I mean, I'm all for the field trip, but why are we going to them?"

"Actually, you're just going to a *him*, not a *them*." A light Russian accent laced Dimitri's words, the only indication of where he'd grown up. Otherwise, I was pretty sure he spoke English better than I did. "Since this is a special case and he's doing us the favor, we're the ones making the trip."

"Who is he?"

"Arthur Schoenberg."

I jerked my gaze from the road to Dimitri.

"What?" I squeaked.

Arthur Schoenberg was a legend. He was one of the greatest Strigoi slayers in living guardian history and used to be the head of the Guardians Council—the group of people who assigned guardians to Moroi and made decisions for all of us. He'd eventually retired and gone back to protecting one of the royal families, the Badicas. Even retired, I knew he was still lethal. His exploits were part of my curriculum.

"Wasn't . . . wasn't there anyone else available?" I asked in a small voice.

I could see Dimitri hiding a smile. "You'll be fine. Besides, if Art approves of you, that's a great recommendation to have on your record."

Art. Dimitri was on a first-name basis with one of the most badass guardians around. Of course, Dimitri was pretty badass himself, so I shouldn't have been surprised.

Silence fell in the car. I bit my lip, suddenly wondering if I'd be able to meet Arthur Schoenberg's standards. My grades were good, but things like running away and getting into fights at school might cast a shadow on how serious I was about my future career.

"You'll be fine," Dimitri repeated. "The good in your record outweighs the bad."

It was like he could read my mind sometimes. I smiled a little and dared to peek at him. It was a mistake. A long, lean body, obvious even while sitting. Bottomless dark eyes. Shoulder-length brown hair tied back at his neck. That hair felt like silk. I knew because I'd run my fingers through it when Victor Dashkov had ensnared us with the lust charm. With great restraint, I forced myself to start breathing again and look away.

"Thanks, Coach," I teased, snuggling back into the seat.

"I'm here to help," he replied. His voice was light and relaxed—rare for him. He was usually wound up tightly, ready for any attack. Probably he figured he was safe inside a Honda—or at least as safe as he could be around me. I wasn't the only one who had trouble ignoring the romantic tension between us.

"You know what would really help?" I asked, not meeting his eyes.

"Hmm?"

"If you turned off this crap music and put on something that came out after the Berlin Wall went down."

Dimitri laughed. “Your worst class is history, yet somehow, you know everything about Eastern Europe.”

“Hey, gotta have material for my jokes, Comrade.”

Still smiling, he turned the radio dial. To a country station.

“Hey! This isn’t what I had in mind,” I exclaimed.

I could tell he was on the verge of laughing again. “Pick. It’s one or the other.”

I sighed. “Go back to the 1980s stuff.”

He flipped the dial, and I crossed my arms over my chest as some vaguely European-sounding band sang about how video had killed the radio star. I wished someone would kill this radio.

Suddenly, five hours didn’t seem as short as I’d thought.

Arthur and the family he protected lived in a small town along I-90, not far from Billings. The general Moroi opinion was split on places to live. Some argued that big cities were the best since they allowed vampires to be lost in the crowds; nocturnal activities didn’t raise so much attention. Other Moroi, like this family, apparently, opted for less populated towns, believing that if there were fewer people to notice you, then you were less likely to be noticed.

I’d convinced Dimitri to stop for food at a twenty-four-hour diner along the way, and between that and stopping to buy gas, it was around noon when we arrived. The house was built in a rambler style, all one level with gray-stained wood siding and big bay windows—tinted to block sunlight, of course. It looked new and expensive, and even out in the middle of nowhere, it was about what I’d expected for members of a royal family.

I jumped down from the Pilot, my boots sinking through an inch of smooth snow and crunching on the gravel of the driveway. The day was still and silent, save for the occasional breath of wind. Dimitri and I walked up to the house, following a river rock sidewalk that cut through the front yard. I could see him sliding into his business mode, but his overall attitude was as cheery as mine. We’d both taken a kind of guilty satisfaction in the pleasant car ride.

My foot slipped on the ice-covered sidewalk, and Dimitri instantly reached out to steady me. I had a weird moment of déjà vu, flashing back to the first night we’d met, back when he’d also saved me from a similar fall. Freezing temperatures or not, his hand felt warm on my arm, even through the layers of down in my parka coat.

“You okay?” He released his hold, to my dismay.

“Yeah,” I said, casting accusing eyes at the icy sidewalk. “Haven’t these people ever heard of salt?”

I meant it jokingly, but Dimitri suddenly stopped walking. I instantly came to a halt too. His expression became tense and alert. He turned his head, eyes searching the broad, white plains surrounding us before settling back on the house. I wanted to ask questions, but something in his posture told me to stay silent. He studied the building for almost a full minute, looked down at the icy sidewalk, then glanced back at the driveway, covered in a sheet of snow broken only by our footprints.

Cautiously, he approached the front door, and I followed. He stopped again, this time to study the door. It wasn’t open, but it wasn’t entirely shut either. It looked like it had been closed in haste, not sealing. Further examination showed scuffs along the door’s edge, as though it had been forced at some point. The

slightest nudge would open it. Dimitri lightly ran his fingers along where the door met its frame, his breath making small clouds in the air. When he touched the door's handle it jiggled a little, like it had been broken.

Finally, he said quietly, "Rose, go wait in the car."

"But wh—"

"Go."

One word—but one filled with power. In that single syllable I was reminded of the man I'd seen throw people around and stake a Strigoi. I backed up, walking on the snow-covered lawn rather than risk the sidewalk. Dimitri stood where he was, not moving until I'd slipped back into the car, closing the door as softly as possible. Then, with the gentlest of movements, he pushed on the barely held door and disappeared inside.

Burning with curiosity, I counted to ten and then climbed out of the car.

I knew better than to go in after him, but I had to know what was going on with this house. The neglected sidewalk and driveway indicated that no one had been home for a couple days, although it could also mean the Badicas simply never left the house. It was possible, I supposed, that they'd been the victims of an ordinary break-in by humans. It was also possible that something had scared them off—say, like Strigoi. I knew that possibility was what had made Dimitri's face turn so grim, but it seemed an unlikely scenario with Arthur Schoenberg on duty.

Standing on the driveway, I glanced up at the sky. The light was bleak and watery, but it was there. Noon. The sun's highest point today. Strigoi couldn't be out in sunlight. I didn't need to fear them, only Dimitri's anger.

I circled around the right side of the house, walking in much deeper snow—almost a foot of it. Nothing else weird about the house struck me. Icicles hung from the eaves, and the tinted windows revealed no secrets. My foot suddenly hit something, and I looked down. There, half-buried in the snow, was a silver stake. It had been driven into the ground. I picked it up and brushed off the snow, frowning. What was a stake doing out here? Silver stakes were valuable. They were a guardian's most deadly weapon, capable of killing a Strigoi with a single strike through the heart. When they were forged, four Moroi charmed them with magic from each of the four elements. I hadn't learned to use one yet, but gripping it in my hand, I suddenly felt safer as I continued my survey.

A large patio door led from the back of the house to a wooden deck that probably would have been a lot of fun to hang out on in the summer. But the patio's glass had been broken, so much so that a person could easily get through the jagged hole. I crept up the deck steps, careful of the ice, knowing I was going to get in major trouble when Dimitri found out what I was doing. In spite of the cold, sweat poured down my neck.

Daylight, daylight, I reminded myself. Nothing to worry about.

I reached the patio and studied the dark glass. I couldn't tell what had broken it. Just inside, snow had blown in and made a small drift on pale blue carpet. I tugged on the door's handle, but it was locked. Not that that mattered with a hole that big. Careful of the sharp edges, I reached through the opening and unlocked the handle's latch from the inside. I removed my hand just as carefully and pulled open the sliding door. It hissed slightly along its tracks, a quiet sound that nonetheless seemed too loud in the eerie silence.

I stepped through the doorway, standing in the patch of sunlight that had been cast inside by opening the door. My eyes adjusted from the sun to the dimness within. Wind swirled through the open patio, dancing with the curtains around me. I was in a living room. It had all the ordinary items one might expect. Couches. TV. A rocking chair.

And a body.

It was a woman. She lay on her back in front of the TV, her dark hair spilling on the floor around her. Her wide eyes stared upward blankly, her face pale—too pale even for a Moroi. For a moment I thought her long hair was covering her neck, too, until I realized that the darkness across her skin was blood—dried blood. Her throat had been ripped out.

The horrible scene was so surreal that I didn't even realize what I was seeing at first. With her posture, the woman might very well have been sleeping. Then I took in the other body: a man on his side only a couple feet away, dark blood staining the carpet around him. Another body was slumped beside the couch: small, child-size. Across the room was another. And another. There were bodies everywhere, bodies and blood.

The scale of the death around me suddenly registered, and my heart began pounding. No, no. It wasn't possible. It was day. Bad things couldn't happen in daylight. A scream started to rise in my throat, suddenly halted when a gloved hand came from behind me and closed over my mouth. I started to struggle; then I smelled Dimitri's aftershave.

"Why," he asked, "don't you ever listen? You'd be dead if *they* were still here."

I couldn't answer, both because of the hand and my own shock. I'd seen someone die once, but I'd never seen death of this magnitude. After almost a minute, Dimitri finally removed his hand, but he stayed close behind me. I didn't want to look anymore, but I seemed unable to drag my eyes away from the scene before me. Bodies everywhere. Bodies and blood.

Finally, I turned toward him. "It's daytime," I whispered. "Bad things don't happen in the day." I heard the desperation in my voice, a little girl's plea that someone would say this was all a bad dream.

"Bad things can happen anytime," he told me. "And this didn't happen during the day. This probably happened a couple of nights ago."

I dared a peek back at the bodies and felt my stomach twist. Two days. Two days to be dead, to have your existence snuffed out—without anyone in the world even knowing you were gone. My eyes fell on a man's body near the room's entrance to a hallway. He was tall, too well-built to be a Moroi. Dimitri must have noticed where I looked.

"Arthur Schoenberg," he said.

I stared at Arthur's bloody throat. "He's dead," I said, as though it wasn't perfectly obvious. "How can he be dead? How could a Strigoi kill Arthur Schoenberg?" It didn't seem possible. You couldn't kill a legend.

Dimitri didn't answer. Instead his hand moved down and closed around where my own hand held the stake. I flinched.

"Where did you get this?" he asked. I loosened my grip and let him take the stake.

"Outside. In the ground."

He held up the stake, studying its surface as it shone in the sunlight. "It broke

the ward."

My mind, still stunned, took a moment to process what he'd said. Then I got it. Wards were magic rings cast by Moroi. Like the stakes, they were made using magic from all four of the elements. They required strong Moroi magic-users, often a couple for each element. The wards could block Strigoi because magic was charged with life, and the Strigoi had none. But wards faded quickly and took a lot of maintenance. Most Moroi didn't use them, but certain places kept them up. St. Vladimir's Academy was ringed with several.

There had been a ward here, but it had been shattered when someone drove the stake through it. Their magic conflicted with each other; the stake had won.

"Strigoi can't touch stakes," I told him. I realized I was using a lot of *can't* and *don't* statements. It wasn't easy having your core beliefs challenged. "And no Moroi or dhampir would do it."

"A human might."

I met his eyes. "Humans don't help Strigoi—" I stopped. There it was again. *Don't.* But I couldn't help it. The one thing we could count on in the fight against Strigoi was their limitations—sunlight, ward, stake magic, etc. We used their weaknesses against them. If they had others—humans—who would help them and weren't affected by those limitations . . .

Dimitri's face was stern, still ready for anything, but the tiniest spark of sympathy flashed in his dark eyes as he watched me wage my mental battle.

"This changes everything, doesn't it?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said. "It does."

TWO

DIMITRI MADE ONE PHONE CALL, and a veritable SWAT team showed up. It took a couple of hours, though, and every minute spent waiting felt like a year. I finally couldn't take it anymore and returned to the car. Dimitri examined the house further and then came to sit with me. Neither of us said a word while we waited. A slide show of the grisly sights inside the house kept playing in my mind. I felt scared and alone and wished he would hold me or comfort me in some way.

Immediately, I scolded myself for wanting that. I reminded myself for the thousandth time that he was my instructor and had no business holding me, no matter what the situation was. Besides, I wanted to be strong. I didn't need to go running to some guy every time things got tough.

When the first group of guardians showed up, Dimitri opened the car door and glanced over at me. "You should see how this is done."

I didn't want to see any more of that house, honestly, but I followed anyway. These guardians were strangers to me, but Dimitri knew them. He always seemed to know everybody. This group was surprised to find a novice on the scene, but none of them protested my presence.

I walked behind them as they examined the house. None of them touched anything, but they knelt by the bodies and studied the bloodstains and broken windows. Apparently, the Strigoi had entered the house through more than just the front door and back patio.

The guardians spoke in brusque tones, displaying none of the disgust and fear I felt. They were like machines. One of them, the only woman in the group, crouched beside Arthur Schoenberg. I was intrigued since female guardians were so rare. I'd heard Dimitri call her Tamara, and she looked about twenty-five. Her black hair just barely touched her shoulders, which was common for guardian women.

Sadness flickered in her gray eyes as she studied the dead guardian's face. "Oh, Arthur," she sighed. Like Dimitri, she managed to convey a hundred things in just a couple words. "Never thought I'd see this day. He was my mentor." With another sigh, Tamara rose.

Her face had become all businesslike once more, as though the guy who'd trained her wasn't lying there in front of her. I couldn't believe it. He was her *mentor*. How could she keep that kind of control? For half a heartbeat, I imagined seeing Dimitri dead on the floor instead. No. No way could I have stayed calm in

her place. I would have gone on a rampage. I would have screamed and kicked things. I would have hit anyone who tried to tell me things would be okay.

Fortunately, I didn't believe anyone could actually take down Dimitri. I'd seen him kill a Strigoi without breaking a sweat. He was invincible. A badass. A god.

Of course, Arthur Schoenberg had been too.

"How could they do that?" I blurted out. Six sets of eyes turned to me. I expected a chastising look from Dimitri for my outburst, but he merely appeared curious. "How could they kill *him*?"

Tamara gave a small shrug, her face still composed. "The same way they kill everyone else. He's mortal, just like the rest of us."

"Yeah, but he's . . . you know, Arthur Schoenberg."

"You tell us, Rose," said Dimitri. "You've seen the house. Tell us how they did it."

As they all watched me, I suddenly realized I might be undergoing a test after all today. I thought about what I'd observed and heard. I swallowed, trying to figure out how the impossible could be possible.

"There were four points of entry, which means at least four Strigoi. There were seven Moroi . . ." The family who lived here had been entertaining some other people, making the massacre that much larger. Three of the victims had been children. ". . . and three guardians. Too many kills. Four Strigoi couldn't have taken down that many. Six probably could if they went for the guardians first and caught them by surprise. The family would have been too panicked to fight back."

"And how did they catch the guardians by surprise?" Dimitri prompted.

I hesitated. Guardians, as a general rule, didn't get caught by surprise. "Because the wards were broken. In a household without wards, there'd probably be a guardian walking the yard at night. But they wouldn't have done that here."

I waited for the next obvious question about how the wards had been broken. But Dimitri didn't ask it. There was no need. We all knew. We'd all seen the stake. Again, a chill ran down my spine. Humans working with Strigoi—a large group of Strigoi.

Dimitri simply nodded as a sign of approval, and the group continued their survey. When we reached a bathroom, I started to avert my gaze. I'd already seen this room with Dimitri earlier and had no wish to repeat the experience. There was a dead man in there, and his dried blood stood out in stark contrast against the white tile. Also, since this room was more interior, it wasn't as cold as the area by the open patio. No preservation. The body didn't smell bad yet, exactly, but it didn't smell right, either.

But as I started to turn away, I caught a glimpse of something dark red—more brown, really—on the mirror. I hadn't noticed it before because the rest of the scene had held all of my attention. There was writing on the mirror, done in blood.

Poor, poor Badicas. So few left. One royal family nearly gone. Others to follow.

Tamara snorted in disgust and turned away from the mirror, studying other details of the bathroom. As we walked out, though, those words repeated in my head. *One royal family nearly gone. Others to follow.*

The Badicas were one of the smaller royal clans, it was true. But it was hardly like those who had been killed here were the last of them. There were probably almost two hundred Badicas left. That wasn't as many as a family like, say, the

Ivashkovs. That particular royal family was huge and widespread. There were, however, a lot more Badicas than there were some other royals.

Like the Dragomirs.

Lissa was the only one left.

If the Strigoi wanted to snuff out royal lines, there was no better chance than to go after her. Moroi blood empowered Strigoi, so I understood their desire for that. I supposed specifically targeting royals was simply part of their cruel and sadistic nature. It was ironic that Strigoi would want to tear apart Moroi society, since many of them had once been a part of it.

The mirror and its warning consumed me for the rest of our stay at the house, and I found my fear and shock transforming into anger. How could they do this? How could any creature be so twisted and evil that they'd do this to a family—that they'd want to wipe out an entire bloodline? How could any creature do this when they'd once been like me and Lissa?

And thinking of Lissa—thinking of Strigoi wanting to wipe out her family too—stirred up a dark rage within me. The intensity of that emotion nearly knocked me over. It was something black and miasmic, swelling and roiling. A storm cloud ready to burst. I suddenly wanted to tear up every Strigoi I could get my hands on.

When I finally got into the car to ride back to St. Vladimir's with Dimitri, I slammed the door so hard that it was a wonder it didn't fall off.

He glanced at me in surprise. "What's wrong?"

"Are you serious?" I exclaimed, incredulous. "How can you ask that? You were there. You saw that."

"I did," he agreed. "But I'm not taking it out on the car."

I fastened my seat belt and glowered. "I hate them. I hate them all! I wish *I'd* been there. I would have ripped *their* throats out!"

I was nearly shouting. Dimitri stared at me, face calm, but he was clearly astonished at my outburst.

"You really think that's true?" he asked me. "You think you could have done better than Art Schoenberg after seeing what the Strigoi did in there? After seeing what Natalie did to you?"

I faltered. I'd tangled briefly with Lissa's cousin, Natalie, when she became a Strigoi, just before Dimitri had shown up to save the day. Even as a new Strigoi—weak and uncoordinated—she'd literally thrown me around the room.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. Suddenly, I felt stupid. I'd seen what Strigoi could do. Me running in impetuously and trying to save the day would have only resulted in a quick death. I was developing into a tough guardian, but I still had a lot to learn—and one seventeen-year-old girl couldn't have stood against six Strigoi.

I opened my eyes. "I'm sorry," I said, gaining control of myself. The rage that had exploded inside me diffused. I didn't know where it had come from. I had a short temper and often acted impulsively, but this had been intense and ugly even for me. Weird.

"It's okay," said Dimitri. He reached over and placed his hand on mine for a few moments. Then he removed it and started the car. "It's been a long day. For all of us."

When we got back to St. Vladimir's Academy around midnight, everyone knew

about the massacre. The vampiric school day had just ended, and I hadn't slept in more than twenty-four hours. I was bleary-eyed and sluggish, and Dimitri ordered me to immediately go back to my dorm room and get some sleep. He, of course, looked alert and ready to take on anything. Sometimes I really wasn't sure if he slept at all. He headed off to consult with other guardians about the attack, and I promised him I'd go straight to bed. Instead, I turned toward the library once he was out of sight. I needed to see Lissa, and the bond told me that was where she was.

It was pitch-black as I walked along the stone walkway that crossed the quad from my dorm to the secondary school's main building. Snow completely covered the grass, but the sidewalk had been meticulously cleared of all ice and snow. It reminded me of the poor Badicas' neglected home.

The commons building was large and gothic-looking, more suited to a medieval movie set than a school. Inside, that air of mystery and ancient history continued to permeate the building: elaborate stone walls and antique paintings warring with computers and fluorescent lights. Modern technology had a foothold here, but it would never dominate.

Slipping through the library's electronic gate, I immediately headed for one of the back corners where geography and travel books were kept. Sure enough, I found Lissa sitting there on the floor, leaning against a bookcase.

"Hey," she said, looking up from an open book propped up on one knee. She brushed a few strands of pale hair out of her face. Her boyfriend, Christian, lay on the floor near her, his head propped up on her other knee. He greeted me by way of a nod. Considering the antagonism that sometimes flared up between us, that was almost on par with him giving me a bear hug. Despite her small smile, I could feel the tension and fear in her; it sang through the bond.

"You heard," I said, sitting down cross-legged.

Her smile slipped, and the feelings of fear and unease within her intensified. I liked that our psychic connection let me protect her better, but I didn't really need my own troubled feelings amplified.

"It's awful," she said with a shudder. Christian shifted and linked his fingers through hers. He squeezed her hand. She squeezed back. Those two were so in love and sugary sweet with each other that I felt like brushing my teeth after being around them. They were subdued just now, however, no doubt thanks to the massacre news. "They're saying . . . they're saying there were six or seven Strigoi. And that humans helped them break the wards."

I leaned my head back against a shelf. News really did travel fast. Suddenly, I felt dizzy. "It's true."

"Really?" asked Christian. "I figured that was just a bunch of hyped-up paranoia."

"No . . ." I realized then that nobody knew where I'd been today. "I . . . I was there."

Lissa's eyes widened, shock coursing into me from her. Even Christian—the poster child for "smartass"—looked grim. If not for the horribleness of it all, I would have taken satisfaction in catching him off guard.

"You're joking," he said, voice uncertain.

"I thought you were taking your Qualifier . . ." Lissa's words trailed off.

"I was supposed to," I said. "It was just a wrong-place-and -wrong-time kind of

thing. The guardian who was going to give me the test lived there. Dimitri and I walked in, and..."

I couldn't finish. Images of the blood and death that had filled the Badica house flashed through my mind again. Concern crossed both Lissa's face and the bond.

"Rose, are you okay?" she asked softly.

Lissa was my best friend, but I didn't want her to know how scared and upset the whole thing had made me. I wanted to be fierce.

"Fine," I said, teeth clenched.

"What was it like?" asked Christian. Curiosity filled his voice, but there was guilt there too—like he knew it was wrong to want to know about such a horrible thing. He couldn't stop himself from asking, though. Lack of impulse control was one thing we had in common.

"It was . . ." I shook my head. "I don't want to talk about it."

Christian started to protest, and then Lissa ran a hand through his sleek black hair. The gentle admonishment silenced him. A moment of awkwardness hung between us all. Reading Lissa's mind, I felt her desperately grope for a new topic.

"They say this is going to mess up all of the holiday visits," she told me after several more moments. "Christian's aunt is going to visit, but most people don't want to travel, and they want their kids to stay here where it's safe. They're terrified this group of Strigoi is on the move."

I hadn't thought about the ramifications of an attack like this. We were only a week or so away from Christmas. Usually, there was a huge wave of travel in the Moroi world this time of year. Students went home to visit their parents; parents came to stay on campus and visit their children.

"This is going to keep a lot of families separated," I murmured.

"And mess up a lot of royal get-togethers," said Christian. His brief seriousness had vanished; his snide air was back. "You know how they are this time of year—always competing with each other to throw the biggest parties. They won't know what to do with themselves."

I could believe it. My life was about fighting, but the Moroi certainly had their share of internal strife—particularly with nobles and royals. They waged their own battles with words and political alliances, and honestly, I preferred the more direct method of hitting and kicking. Lissa and Christian in particular had to navigate some troubled waters. They were both from royal families, which meant they got a lot of attention both inside and outside of the Academy.

Things were worse for them than for most Moroi royals. Christian's family lived under the shadow cast by his parents. They had purposely become Strigoi, trading their magic and morality to become immortal and subsist on killing others. His parents were dead now, but that didn't stop people from not trusting him. They seemed to think he'd go Strigoi at any moment and take everyone else with him. His abrasiveness and dark sense of humor didn't really help things, either.

Lissa's attention came from being the last one left in her family. No other Moroi had enough Dragomir blood in them to earn the name. Her future husband would probably have enough somewhere in his family tree to make sure her children were Dragomirs, but for now, being the only one made her kind of a celebrity.

Thinking about this suddenly reminded me of the warning scrawled on the mirror. Nausea welled up in me. That dark anger and despair stirred, but I pushed it aside with a joke.

“You guys should try solving your problems like we do. A fistfight here and there might do you royals some good.”

Both Lissa and Christian laughed at this. He glanced up at her with a sly smile, showing his fangs as he did. “What do you think? I bet I could take you if we went one on one.”

“You wish,” she teased. Her troubled feelings lightened.

“I do, actually,” he said, holding her gaze.

There was an intensely sensual note to his voice that made her heart race. Jealousy shot through me. She and I had been best friends our entire life. I could read her mind. But the fact remained: Christian was a huge part of her world now, and he played a role I never could—just as he could never have a part of the connection that existed between me and her. We both sort of accepted but didn’t like the fact that we had to split her attention, and at times, it seemed the truce we held for her sake was paper thin.

Lissa brushed her hand against his cheek. “Behave.”

“I am,” he told her, his voice still a little husky. “Sometimes. But sometimes you don’t want me to. . . .”

Groaning, I stood up. “God. I’m going to leave you guys alone now.”

Lissa blinked and dragged her eyes away from Christian, suddenly looking embarrassed.

“Sorry,” she murmured. A delicate pink flush spread over her cheeks. Since she was pale like all Moroi, it actually sort of made her look prettier. Not that she needed much help in that department. “You don’t have to go. . . .”

“No, it’s fine. I’m exhausted,” I assured her. Christian didn’t look too broken up about seeing me leave. “I’ll catch you tomorrow.”

I started to turn away, but Lissa called to me. “Rose? Are you . . . are you sure you’re okay? After everything that happened?”

I met her jade green eyes. Her concern was so strong and deep that it made my chest ache. I might be closer to her than anyone else in the world, but I didn’t want her worrying about *me*. It was my job to keep her safe. She shouldn’t be troubled about protecting me—particularly if Strigoi had suddenly decided to make a hit list of royals.

I flashed her a saucy grin. “I’m fine. Nothing to worry about except you guys tearing each other’s clothes before I get a chance to leave.”

“Then you better go now,” said Christian dryly.

She elbowed him, and I rolled my eyes. “Good night,” I told them.

As soon as my back was to them, my smile vanished. I walked back to my dorm with a heavy heart, hoping I wouldn’t dream about the Badicas tonight.

THREE

THE LOBBY OF MY DORM was abuzz when I sprinted downstairs to my before school practice. The commotion didn't surprise me. A good night's sleep had gone far to chase away the images from last night, but I knew neither I nor my classmates would easily forget what had taken place outside Billings.

And yet, as I studied the faces and clusters of other novices, I noticed something weird. The fear and tension from yesterday were still around, certainly, but something new was there too: excitement. A couple of freshmen novices were practically squealing with joy as they spoke in hushed whispers. Nearby, a group of guys my own age were gesturing wildly, enthusiastic grins on their faces.

I had to be missing something here—unless all of yesterday had been a dream. It took every ounce of self-control I had not to go over and ask somebody what was happening. If I delayed, I'd be late for practice. The curiosity was killing me, though. Had the Strigoi and their humans been found and killed? That would certainly be good news, but something told me that wasn't the case. Pushing open the front doors, I lamented that I'd just have to wait until breakfast to find out.

"Hath-away, don't run-away," a singsong voice called.

I glanced behind me and grinned. Mason Ashford, another novice and a good friend of mine, jogged up and fell in step with me.

"What are you, twelve?" I asked, continuing on toward the gym.

"Nearly," he said. "I missed your smiling face yesterday. Where were you?"

Apparently my presence at the Badica house still wasn't widely known. It wasn't a secret or anything, but I didn't want to discuss any gory details. "Had a training thing with Dimitri."

"God," muttered Mason. "That guy is always working you. Doesn't he realize he's depriving us of your beauty and charm?"

"Smiling face? Beauty and charm? You're laying it on a little thick this morning, aren't you?" I laughed.

"Hey, I'm just telling it like it is. Really, you're lucky to have someone as suave and brilliant as me paying this much attention to you."

I kept grinning. Mason was a huge flirt, and he liked to flirt with me in particular. Part of it was just because I was good at it and liked to flirt back. But I knew his feelings toward me were more than just friendly, and I was still deciding how I felt about that. He and I had the same goofy sense of humor and frequently drew attention to ourselves in class and among friends. He had gorgeous blue eyes and messy red hair that never seemed to lie flat. It was cute.

But dating someone new was going to be kind of difficult when I still kept thinking about the time I was half-naked in bed with Dimitri.

"Suave and brilliant, huh?" I shook my head. "I don't think you pay nearly as much attention to me as you do your ego. Someone needs to knock it down a little."

"Oh yeah?" he asked. "Well, you can try your best on the slopes."

I stopped walking. "The what?"

"The slopes." He tilted his head. "You know, the ski trip."

"What ski trip?" I was apparently missing something serious here.

"Where have you been this morning?" he asked, looking at me like I was a crazy woman.

"In bed! I only got up, like, five minutes ago. Now, start from the beginning and tell me what you're talking about." I shivered from the lack of movement. "And let's keep walking. " We did.

"So, you know how everyone's afraid to have their kids come home for Christmas? Well, there's this *huge* ski lodge in Idaho that's exclusively used by royals and rich Moroi. The people who own it are opening it up for Academy students and their families—and actually any other Moroi who want to go. With everyone in one spot, they're going to have a ton of guardians to protect the place, so it'll be totally safe."

"You can't be serious," I said. We reached the gym and stepped inside out of the cold.

Mason nodded eagerly. "It's true. The place is supposed to be amazing." He gave me the grin that always made me smile in return. "We're going to live like royalty, Rose. At least for a week or so. We take off the day after Christmas."

I stood there, both excited and stunned. I hadn't seen this coming. It really was a brilliant idea, one that let families reunite safely. And what a reunion spot! A royal ski lodge. I'd expected to spend most of my holiday break hanging out here and watching TV with Lissa and Christian. Now I'd be living it up in five-star accommodations. Lobster dinners. Massages. Cute ski instructors . . .

Mason's enthusiasm was contagious. I could feel it welling up in me, and then, suddenly, it slammed to a halt.

Studying my face, he saw the change right away. "What's wrong? This is cool."

"It is," I admitted. "And I get why everyone's excited, but the reason we're getting to go to this fancy place is because, well, because people are dead. I mean, doesn't this all seem weird?"

Mason's cheery expression sobered a little. "Yeah, but we're alive, Rose. We can't stop living because other people are dead. And we have to make sure *more* people don't die. That's why this place is such a great idea. It's safe." His eyes turned stormy. "God, I can't wait until we're out of here in the field. After hearing about what happened, I just want to go tear apart some Strigoi. I wish we could go now, you know? There's no reason. They could use the extra help, and we pretty much know everything we need to."

The fierceness in his voice reminded me of my outburst yesterday, though he wasn't quite as worked up as I'd been. His eagerness to act was impetuous and naive, whereas mine had been born out of some weird, dark irrationality I still didn't entirely understand.

When I didn't respond, Mason gave me a puzzled look. "Don't you want to?"

“I don’t know, Mase.” I stared down at the floor, avoiding his eyes as I studied the toe of my shoe. “I mean, I don’t want Strigoi out there, attacking people either. And I want to stop them in theory . . . but, well, we aren’t even close to being ready. I’ve seen what they can do. . . . I don’t know. Rushing in isn’t the answer.” I shook my head and looked back up. Good grief. I sounded so logical and cautious. I sounded like Dimitri. “It’s not important since it’s not going to happen anyway. I suppose we should just be excited about the trip, huh?”

Mason’s moods were quick to change, and he turned easygoing once more. “Yup. And you’d better try to remember how to ski, because I’m calling you out on knocking down my ego out there. Not that it’s going to happen.”

I smiled again. “Boy, it sure is going to be sad when I make you cry. I kind of feel guilty already.”

He opened his mouth, no doubt to deliver some smartass reply, and then caught sight of something—or rather, someone—behind me. I glanced over and saw Dimitri’s tall form approaching from the other side of the gym.

Mason swept me a gallant bow. “Your lord and master. Catch you later, Hathaway. Start planning your ski strategies.” He opened the door and disappeared into the frigid darkness. I turned around and joined Dimitri.

Like other dhampir novices, I spent half of my school day on one form or another of guardian training, be it actual physical combat or learning about Strigoi and how to defend against them. Novices also sometimes had practices after school. I, however, was in a unique situation.

I still stood by my decision to run away from St. Vladimir’s. Victor Dashkov had posed too much of a threat to Lissa. But our extended vacation had come with consequences. Being away for two years had put me behind in my guardian classes, so the school had declared that I had to make up for it by going to extra practices before *and* after school.

With Dimitri.

Little did they know that they were also giving me lessons in avoiding temptation. But my attraction to him aside, I was a fast learner, and with his help, I had almost caught up to the other seniors.

Since he wasn’t wearing a coat, I knew we’d be working inside today, which was good news. It was freezing out. Yet even the happiness I felt over that was nothing compared to what I felt when I saw what exactly he had set up in one of the training rooms.

There were practice dummies arranged on the far wall, dummies that looked amazingly lifelike. No straw-stuffed burlap bags here. There were men and women, wearing ordinary clothes, with rubbery skin and different hair and eye colors. Their expressions ranged from happy to scared to angry. I’d worked with these dummies before in other trainings, using them to practice kicks and punches. But I’d never worked with them while holding what Dimitri held: a silver stake.

“Sweet,” I breathed.

It was identical to the one I’d found at the Badica house. It had a hand grip at the bottom, almost like a hilt without the little side flourishes. That was where its resemblance to a dagger ended. Rather than a flat blade, the stake had a thick, rounded body that narrowed to a point, kind of like an ice pick. The entire thing was a little shorter than my forearm.

Dimitri leaned casually against the wall, in an easy stance he always pulled off remarkably well, despite being almost six-seven. With one hand, he tossed the stake into the air. It spun around in a cartwheel a couple of times and then came down. He caught it hilt first.

"Please tell me I get to learn how to do *that* today," I said.

Amusement flashed in the dark depths of his eyes. I think he had a hard time keeping a straight face around me sometimes.

"You'll be lucky if I let you *hold* it today," he said. He flipped the stake into the air again. My eyes followed it longingly. I started to point out that I had already held one, but I knew that line of logic would get me nowhere.

Instead, I tossed my backpack on the floor, threw off my coat, and crossed my arms expectantly. I had on loose pants tied at the waist and a tank top with a hoodie over it. My dark hair was pulled brutally back into a ponytail. I was ready for anything.

"You want me to tell you how they work and why I should always be cautious around them," I announced.

Dimitri stopped flipping the stake and stared at me in astonishment.

"Come on," I laughed. "You don't think I know how you work by now? We've been doing this for almost three months. You always make me talk safety and responsibility before I can do anything fun."

"I see," he said. "Well, I guess you've got it all figured out. By all means, go on with the lesson. I'll just wait over here until you need me again."

He tucked the stake into a leather sheath hanging from his belt and then made himself comfortable against the wall, hands stuffed in pockets. I waited, figuring he was joking, but when he said nothing else, I realized he'd meant his words. With a shrug, I launched into what I knew.

"Silver always has powerful effects on any magical creature—it can help or hurt them if you put enough power into it. These stakes are really hard-core because it takes four different Moroi to make them, and they use each of the elements during the forging." I frowned, suddenly considering something. "Well, except spirit. So these things are supercharged and are about the only non-decapitating weapon that can do damage to a Strigoi—but to kill them, it has to be through the heart."

"Will they hurt *you*?"

I shook my head. "No. I mean, well, yeah, if you drive one through my heart it will, but it won't hurt me like it would a Moroi. Scratch one of them with this, and it'll hit them pretty hard—but not as hard as it'd hit a Strigoi. And they won't hurt humans, either."

I stopped for a moment and stared absentmindedly at the window behind Dimitri. Frost covered the glass in sparkling, crystalline patterns, but I hardly noticed. Mentioning humans and stakes had transported me back to the Badica house. Blood and death flashed through my thoughts.

Seeing Dimitri watching me, I shook off the memories and kept going with the lesson. Dimitri would occasionally give a nod or ask a clarifying question. As the time ticked down, I kept expecting him to tell me I was finished and could start hacking up the dummies. Instead, he waited until almost ten minutes before the end of our session before leading me over to one of them—it was a man with blond hair and a goatee. Dimitri took the stake out from its sheath but didn't

hand it to me.

"Where are you going to put this?" he asked.

"In the heart," I replied irritably. "I already told you that like a hundred times. Can I have it now?"

He allowed himself a smile. "Where's the heart?"

I gave him an are-you-serious look. He merely shrugged.

With overdramatic emphasis, I pointed to the left side of the dummy's chest. Dimitri shook his head.

"That's not where the heart is," he told me.

"Sure it is. People put their hands over their hearts when they say the Pledge of Allegiance or sing the national anthem."

He continued to stare at me expectantly.

I turned back to the dummy and studied it. In the back of my brain, I remembered learning CPR and where we had to place our hands. I tapped the center of the dummy's chest.

"Is it here?"

He arched an eyebrow. Normally I thought that was cool. Today it was just annoying. "I don't know," he said. "Is it?"

"That's what I'm asking you!"

"You shouldn't have to ask me. Don't you all have to take physiology?"

"Yeah. Junior year. I was on 'vacation,' remember?" I pointed to the gleaming stake. "Can I please touch it now?"

He flipped the stake again, letting it flash in the light, and then it disappeared in the sheath. "I want you to *tell* me where the heart is the next time we meet. Exactly where. And I want to know what's in the way of it too."

I gave him my fiercest glare, which—judging from his expression—must not have been that fierce. Nine out of ten times, I thought Dimitri was the sexiest thing walking the earth. Then, there were times like this . . .

I headed off to first period, a combat class, in a bad mood. I didn't like looking incompetent in front of Dimitri, and I'd really, *really* wanted to use one of those stakes. So in class I took out my annoyance on anyone I could punch or kick. By the end of class, no one wanted to spar with me. I'd accidentally hit Meredith—one of the few other girls in my class—so hard that she'd felt it through her shin padding. She was going to have an ugly bruise and kept looking at me as though I'd done it on purpose. I apologized to no avail.

Afterward, Mason found me once again. "Oh, man," he said, studying my face. "Who pissed you off?"

I immediately launched into my tale of silver stake and heart woes.

To my annoyance, he laughed. "How do you not know where the heart is? Especially considering how many of them you've broken?"

I gave him the same ferocious look I'd given Dimitri. This time, it worked. Mason's face paled.

"Belikov is a sick, evil man who should be thrown into a pit of rabid vipers for the great offense he committed against you this morning."

"Thank you." I said primly. Then, I considered. "Can vipers be rabid?"

"I don't see why not. Everything can be. I think." He held the hallway door open for me. "Canadian geese might be worse than vipers, though."

I gave him a sidelong look. "Canadian geese are deadlier than vipers?"

“You ever tried to feed those little bastards?” he asked, attempting seriousness and failing. “They’re vicious. You get thrown to vipers, you die quickly. But the geese? That’ll go on for days. More suffering.”

“Wow. I don’t know whether I should be impressed or frightened that you’ve thought about all this,” I remarked.

“Just trying to find creative ways to avenge your honor, that’s all.”

“You just never struck me as the creative type, Mase.”

We stood just outside our second-period classroom. Mason’s expression was still light and joking, but there was a suggestive note in his voice when he spoke again. “Rose, when I’m around you, I think of *all sorts* of creative things to do.”

I was still giggling about the vipers and abruptly stopped, staring at him in surprise. I’d always thought Mason was cute, but with that serious, smoky look in his eyes, it suddenly occurred to me for the first time that he was actually kind of sexy.

“Oh, look at that,” he laughed, noticing how much he’d caught me off guard. “Rose gets rendered speechless. Ashford 1, Hathaway 0.”

“Hey, I don’t want to make you cry before the trip. It won’t be any fun if I’ve already broken you before we even hit the slopes.”

He laughed, and we stepped into the room. This was a class on bodyguard theory, one that took place in an actual classroom instead of the practice field. It was a nice break from all the physical exertion. Today, there were three guardians standing at the front who weren’t from the school’s regiment. Holiday visitors, I realized. Parents and their guardians had already started coming to campus to accompany their children to the ski resort. My interest was piqued immediately.

One of the guests was a tall guy who looked like he was about a hundred years old but could still kick major ass. The other guy was about Dimitri’s age. He had deeply tanned skin and was built well enough that a few of the girls in class looked ready to swoon.

The last guardian was a woman. Her auburn hair was cropped and curly, and her brown eyes were currently narrowed in thought. As I’ve said, a lot of dhampir women choose to have children rather than follow the guardian path. Since I too was one of the few women in this profession, I was always excited to meet others —like Tamara.

Only, this wasn’t Tamara. This was someone I’d known for years, someone who triggered anything but pride and excitement. Instead, I felt resentment. Resentment, anger, and burning outrage.

The woman standing in front of the class was my mother.

FOUR

I COULDN'T BELIEVE IT. JANINE HATHAWAY. My mother. My insanely famous and stunningly absent mother. She was no Arthur Schromberg, but she did have a pretty stellar reputation in the guardian world. I hadn't seen her in years because she was always off on same insane mission. And yet . . . here she was at the Academy right now—right *in front* of me—and she hadn't even bothered to let me know she was coming. So much for motherly love.

What the hell was she doing here anyway? The answer came quickly. All the Moroi who came to campus would have their guardians in tow. My mother protected a noble from the Szelsky clan, and several members of that family had shown up for the holidays. Of course she'd be here with him.

I slid into my chair and felt something inside of me shrivel up. I knew she had to have seen me come in, but her attention was focused elsewhere. She had on jeans and a beige T-shirt, covered with what had to be the most boring denim jacket I'd ever seen. At only five feet tall, she was dwarfed by the other guardians, but she had a presence and way of standing that made her seem taller.

Our instructor, Stan, introduced the guests and explained that they were going to share real-life experiences with us.

He paced the front of the room, bushy eyebrows knitting together as he spoke. "I know this is unusual," he explained. "Visiting guardians usually don't have time to stop by our classes. Our three guests, however, have made time to come talk to you today in light of what's happened recently. . . ." He paused a moment, and no one needed to tell us what he was referring to. The Badica attack. He cleared his throat and tried again. "In light of what's happened, we thought it might better prepare you to learn from those currently working in the field."

The class tensed with excitement. Hearing stories—particularly ones with a lot of blood and action—was a hell of a lot more interesting than analyzing theory from a textbook. Apparently some of the other campus guardians thought so too. They often stopped by our classes, but they were present today in a larger-than-usual number. Dimitri stood among them in the back.

The old guy went first. He launched into his story, and I found myself getting hooked in. It described a time when the youngest son of the family he guarded had wandered off in a public place that Strigoi were lurking in.

"The sun was about to set," he told us in a gravelly voice. He swept his hands in a downward motion, apparently to demonstrate how a sunset worked. "There were only two of us, and we had to make a snap decision on how to proceed."

I leaned forward, elbows propped up on my desk. Guardians often worked in pairs. One—the near guard—usually stayed close to those being guarded while the other—the far guard—scouted the area. The far guard still usually stayed within eye contact, so I recognized the dilemma here. Thinking about it, I decided that if I were in that situation, I'd have the near guardian take the rest of the family to a secure location while the other guardian searched for the boy.

"We had the family stay inside a restaurant with my partner while I swept the rest of the area," continued the old guardian. He spread his hands out in a sweeping motion, and I felt smug over having made the correct call. The story ended happily, with a found boy and no Strigoi encounters.

The second guy's anecdote talked about how he'd gotten the drop on a Strigoi stalking some Moroi.

"I wasn't even technically on duty," he said. He was the really cute one, and a girl sitting near me stared at him with wide, adoring eyes. "I was visiting a friend and the family he guarded. As I was leaving their apartment, I saw a Strigoi lurking in the shadows. He never expected a guardian to be out there. I circled the block, came up behind him, and . . ." The man made a staking motion, far more dramatic than the old guy's hand gestures had been. The storyteller even went so far as to mimic twisting the stake into the Strigoi's heart.

And then it was my mother's turn. A scowl spread over my face before she even said a word, a scowl that grew worse once she actually launched into the story. I swear, if I didn't believe her incapable of having the imagination for it—and her bland clothing choices proved she really *didn't* have an imagination—I would have thought she was lying. It was more than a story. It was an epic tale, the kind of thing that gets made into movies and wins Oscars.

She talked about how her charge, Lord Szelsky, and his wife had attended a ball put on by another prominent royal family. Several Strigoi had been lying in wait. My mother discovered one, promptly staked it, and then alerted the other guardians present. With their help, she hunted down the other Strigoi lurking around and performed most of the kills herself.

"It wasn't easy," she explained. From anyone else that statement would have sounded like bragging. Not her. There was a briskness to the way she spoke, an efficient way of stating facts that left no room for flourishes. She'd been raised in Glasgow and some of her words still had a Scottish lilt. "There were three others on the premises. At the time, that was considered an unusually large number to be working together. That's not necessarily true now, considering the Badica massacre. " A few people flinched at the casual way she spoke about the attack. Once again, I could see the bodies. "We had to dispatch the remaining Strigoi as quickly and quietly as possible, so as not to alert the others. Now, if you have the element of surprise, the best way to take Strigoi is to come around from behind, break their necks, and then stake them. Breaking their necks won't kill them, of course, but it stuns them and allows you to do the staking before they can make any noise. The most difficult part is actually sneaking up on them, because their hearing is so acute. Since I'm smaller and lighter than most guardians, I can move fairly quietly. So I ended up performing two of the three kills myself."

Again, she used that matter-of-fact tone as she described her own stealthy skills. It was annoying, more so than if she'd been openly haughty about how awesome she was. My classmates' faces shone with wonder; they were clearly more

interested in the idea of breaking a Strigoi's neck than analyzing my mother's narrative skills.

She continued with the story. When she and the other guardians had killed the remaining Strigoi, they'd discovered two Moroi had been taken from the party. Such an act wasn't uncommon for Strigoi. Sometimes they wanted to save Moroi for a later "snack"; sometimes lower-ranking Strigoi were dispatched by more powerful ones to bring back prey. Regardless, two Moroi were gone from the ball, and their guardian had been injured.

"Naturally, we couldn't leave those Moroi in Strigoi clutches," she said. "We tracked the Strigoi to their hideout and found several of them living together. I'm sure you can recognize how rare that is."

It was. The evil and selfish nature of Strigoi made them turn on each other as easily as they did their victims. Organizing for attacks—when they had an immediate and bloody goal in mind—was the best they could do. But living together? No. It was almost impossible to imagine.

"We managed to free the two captive Moroi, only to discover that others were being held prisoner," my mother said. "We couldn't send the ones we'd rescued back by themselves, though, so the guardians who were with me escorted them out and left it to me to get the others."

Yes, of course, I thought. My mother bravely went in alone. Along the way, she got captured but managed to escape and rescue the prisoners. In doing so, she performed what had to be the hat trick of the century, killing Strigoi in all three ways: staking, decapitation, and setting them on fire.

"I had just staked a Strigoi when two more attacked," she explained. "I didn't have time to pull the stake out when the others jumped me. Fortunately, there was an open fireplace nearby, and I pushed one of the Strigoi into it. The last one chased me outside, into an old shed. There was an axe inside and I used that to cut off her head. I then took a can of gasoline and returned to the house. The one I'd thrown into the fireplace hadn't completely burned, but once I doused him in gasoline, he went up pretty quickly."

The classroom was in awe as she spoke. Mouths dropped. Eyes bugged. Not a sound could be heard. Glancing around, I felt like time had frozen for everyone—except me. I appeared to be the only one unimpressed by her harrowing tale, and seeing the awe on everyone's faces enraged me. When she finished, a dozen hands shot up as the class peppered her with questions about her techniques, whether she was scared, etc.

After about the tenth question, I couldn't take it anymore. I raised my hand. It took her a while to notice and call on me. She seemed mildly astonished to find me in class. I considered myself lucky that she even recognized me.

"So, Guardian Hathaway," I began. "Why didn't you guys just secure the place?"

She frowned. I think she'd gone on her guard the moment she called on me. "What do you mean?"

I shrugged and slouched back in my desk, attempting a casual and conversational air. "I don't know. It seems to me like you guys messed up. Why didn't you scope out the place and make sure it was clear of Strigoi in the first place? Seems like you could have saved yourself a lot of trouble."

All eyes in the room turned toward me. My mother was momentarily at a loss

for words. “If we hadn’t gone through all that ‘trouble,’ there’d be seven more Strigoi walking the world, *and* those other captured Moroi would be dead or turned by now.”

“Yeah, yeah, I get how you guys saved the day and all that, but I’m going back to the principles here. I mean, this is a theory class, right?” I glanced over at Stan who was regarding me with a very stormy look. He and I had a long and unpleasant history of classroom conflicts, and I suspected we were on the verge of another. “So I just want to figure out what went wrong in the beginning.”

I’ll say this for her—my mother had a hell of a lot more self-control than I did. Had our roles been reversed, I would have walked over and smacked me by now. Her face stayed perfectly calm, however, and a small tightness in the set of her lips was the only sign that I was pissing her off.

“It’s not that simple,” she replied. “The venue had an extremely complex layout. We went through it initially and found nothing. It’s believed the Strigoi came in after the festivities had started—or that there might have been passages and hidden rooms we hadn’t been aware of.”

The class ooh’ed and ahh’ed over the idea of hidden passages, but I wasn’t impressed.

“So what you’re saying is that you guys either failed to detect them during your first sweep, or they broke through the ‘security’ you set up during the party. Seems like someone messed up either way.”

The tightness in her lips increased, and her voice grew frosty. “We did the best we could with an unusual situation. I can see how someone at your level might not be able to grasp the intricacies of what I’m describing, but once you’ve actually learned enough to go beyond *theory*, you’ll see how different it is when you’re actually out there and lives are in your hands.”

“No doubt,” I agreed. “Who am I to question your methods? I mean, whatever gets you the *molnija* marks, right?”

“Miss Hathaway.” Stan’s deep voice rumbled through the room. “Please take your things and go wait outside for the remainder of class.”

I stared at him in bewilderment. “Are you serious? Since when is there anything wrong with asking questions?”

“Your attitude is what’s wrong.” He pointed at the door. “Go.”

A silence heavier and deeper than when my mother had told her story descended over everyone. I did my best not to cower under the stares of guardians and novices alike. This wasn’t the first time I’d been kicked out of Stan’s class. It wasn’t even the first time I’d been kicked out of Stan’s class while Dimitri was watching. Slinging my backpack over my shoulder, I crossed the short distance to the door—a distance that felt like miles—and refused to make eye contact with my mother as I passed.

About five minutes before the class let out, she slipped out of the room and walked over to where I sat in the hallway. Looking down on me, she put her hands on her hips in that annoying way that made her seem taller than she was. It wasn’t fair that someone over half a foot shorter than me could make me feel so small.

“Well. I see your manners haven’t improved over the years.”

I stood up and felt a glare snap into place. “Nice to see you too. I’m surprised you even recognized me. In fact, I didn’t even think you *remembered* me, seeing as

how you never bothered to let me know you were on campus."

She shifted her hands from her hips and crossed her arms across her chest, becoming—if possible—even more impassive. "I couldn't neglect my duty to come coddle you."

"Coddle?" I asked. This woman had never coddled me in her life. I couldn't believe she even knew the word.

"I wouldn't expect you to understand. From what I hear, you don't really know what 'duty' is."

"I know exactly what it is," I retorted. My voice was intentionally haughty. "Better than most people."

Her eyes widened in a sort of mock surprise. I used that sarcastic look on a lot of people and didn't appreciate having it directed toward me. "Oh really? Where were you for the last two years?"

"Where were you for the last five?" I demanded. "Would you have known I was gone if someone hadn't told you?"

"Don't turn this back on me. I was away because I had to be. *You* were away so you could go shopping and stay up late."

My hurt and embarrassment morphed into pure fury. Apparently, I was never going to live down the consequences of running away with Lissa.

"You have *no* idea why I left," I said, my voice's volume rising. "And you have no right to make assumptions about my life when you don't know anything about it."

"I've read reports about what happened. You had reason for concern, but you acted incorrectly." Her words were formal and crisp. She could have been teaching one of my classes. "You should have gone to others for help."

"There was no one I could go to—not when I didn't have hard proof. Besides, we've been learning that we're supposed to think independently."

"Yes," she replied. "Emphasis on *learning*. Something you missed out on for two years. You're hardly in a position to lecture me about guardian protocol."

I wound up in arguments all the time; something in my nature made that inevitable. So I was used to defending myself and having insults slammed at me. I had a tough skin. But somehow, around her—in the brief times I *had* been around her—I always felt like I was three years old. Her attitude humiliated me, and touching on my missed training— already a prickly subject—only made me feel worse. I crossed my arms in a fair imitation of her own stance and managed a smug look.

"Yeah? Well, that's not what my teachers think. Even after missing all that time, I've still caught up with everyone else in my class."

She didn't answer right away. Finally, in a flat voice, she said, "If you hadn't left, you would have surpassed them."

Turning military-style, she walked off down the hall. A minute later, the bell rang, and the rest of Stan's class spilled into the hall.

Even Mason couldn't cheer me up after that. I spent the rest of the day angry and annoyed, sure that everyone was whispering about my mother and me. I skipped lunch and went to the library to read a book about physiology and anatomy.

When it was time for my after-school training with Dimitri, I practically ran up to the practice dummy. With a curled fist, I slapped its chest, very slightly to the

left but mostly in the center.

"There," I told him. "The heart is there, and the sternum and ribs are in the way. Can I have the stake now?"

Crossing my arms, I glanced up at him triumphantly, waiting for him to shower me with praise for my new cunning. Instead, he simply nodded in acknowledgment, like I should already have known that. And yeah, I should have.

"And how do you get through the sternum and the ribs?" he asked.

I sighed. I'd figured out the answer to one question, only to be given another. Typical.

We spent a large part of the practice going over that, and he demonstrated several techniques that would yield the quickest kill. Every movement he made was both graceful and deadly. He made it look effortless, but I knew better.

When he suddenly extended his hand and offered the stake to me, I didn't understand at first. "You're giving it to me?"

His eyes sparkled. "I can't believe you're holding back. I figured you'd have taken it and run by now."

"Aren't you always teaching me to hold back?" I asked.

"Not on everything."

"But on *some* things."

I heard the double meaning in my voice and wondered where it had come from. I'd accepted a while ago that there were too many reasons for me to even think about him romantically anymore. Every once in a while, I slipped a little and kind of wished he would too. It'd have been nice to know that he still wanted me, that I still drove him crazy. Studying him now, I realized he might not ever slip because I *didn't* drive him crazy anymore. It was a depressing thought.

"Of course," he said, showing no indication we'd discussed anything other than class matters. "It's like everything else. Balance. Know which things to run forward with—and know which to leave alone." He placed a heavy emphasis on that last statement.

Our eyes met briefly, and I felt electricity race through me. He *did* know what I was talking about. And like always, he was ignoring it and being my teacher—which is exactly what he should have been doing. With a sigh, I pushed my feelings for him out of my head and tried to remember that I was about to touch the weapon I'd been longing for since childhood. The memory of the Badica house came back to me yet again. The Strigoi were out there. I needed to focus.

Hesitantly, almost reverentially, I reached out and curled my fingers around the hilt. The metal was cool and tingled against my skin. It was etched along the hilt for better grip, but in trailing my fingers over the rest of it, I found the surface to be as smooth as glass. I lifted it from his hand and brought it to me, taking a long time to study it and get used to its weight. An anxious part of me wanted to turn around and impale all of the dummies, but instead I looked up at Dimitri and asked, "What should I do first?"

In his typical way, he covered basics first, honing the way I held and moved with the stake. Later on, he finally let me attack one of the dummies, at which point I did indeed discover it was *not* effortless. Evolution had done a smart thing in protecting the heart with the sternum and ribs. Yet through it all, Dimitri never faltered in diligence and patience, guiding me through every step and correcting the finest details.

"Slide *up* through the ribs," he explained, watching me try to fit the stake's point through a gap in the bones. "It'll be easier since you're shorter than most of your attackers. Plus, you can slide along the lower rib's edge."

When practice ended, he took the stake back and nodded his approval.

"Good. Very good."

I glanced at him in surprise. He didn't usually hand out a lot of praise.

"Really?"

"You do it like you've been doing it for years."

I felt a delighted grin creep over my face as we started leaving the practice room. When we neared the door, I noticed a dummy with curly red hair. Suddenly, all the events from Stan's class came tumbling back into my head. I scowled.

"Can I stake that one next time?"

He picked up his coat and put it on. It was long and brown, made of distressed leather. It looked very much like a cowboy duster, though he'd never admit to it. He had a secret fascination with the Old West. I didn't really understand it, but then, I didn't get his weird musical preferences either.

"I don't think that'd be healthy," he said.

"It'd be better than me actually doing it to *her*," I grumbled, slinging my backpack over one shoulder. We headed out to the gym.

"Violence isn't the answer to your problems," he said sagely.

"She's the one with the problem. And I thought the whole point of my education was that violence *is* the answer."

"Only to those who bring it to you first. Your mother isn't assaulting you. You two are just too much alike, that's all."

I stopped walking. "I'm not anything like her! I mean . . . we kind of have the same eyes. But I'm a lot taller. And my hair's completely different." I pointed to my ponytail, just in case he wasn't aware that my thick brown-black hair didn't look like my mother's auburn curls.

He still had kind of an amused expression, but there was something hard in his eyes too. "I'm not talking about your appearances, and you know it."

I looked away from that knowing gaze. My attraction to Dimitri had started almost as soon as we'd met—and it wasn't just because he was so hot, either. I felt like he understood part of me that I didn't understand myself, and sometimes I was pretty sure I understood parts of him that he didn't understand either.

The only problem was that he had the annoying tendency to point out things about myself I didn't *want* to understand.

"You think I'm jealous?"

"Are you?" he asked. I hated it when he answered my questions with questions. "If so, what are you jealous of exactly?"

I glanced back at Dimitri. "I don't know. Maybe I'm jealous of her reputation. Maybe I'm jealous because she's put more time into her reputation than into me. I don't know."

"You don't think what she did was great?"

"Yes. No. I don't know. It just sounded like such a . . . I don't know . . . like she was bragging. Like she did it for the glory." I grimaced. "For the marks." *Molnija* marks were tattoos awarded to guardians when they killed Strigoi. Each one looked like a tiny *x* made of lightning bolts. They went on the backs of our necks

and showed how experienced a guardian was.

"You think facing down Strigoi is worth a few marks? I thought you'd learned something from the Badica house."

I felt stupid. "That's not what I—"

"Come on."

I stopped walking. "What?"

We'd been heading toward my dorm, but now he nodded his head toward the opposite side of campus. "I want to show you something."

"What is it?"

"That not all marks are badges of honor."

FIVE

I HAD NO IDEA WHAT DIMITRI was talking about, but I followed along obediently.

To my surprise, he led me out of the boundaries of the campus and into the surrounding woods. The Academy owned a lot of land, not all of which was actively used for educational purposes. We were in a remote part of Montana, and at times, it seemed as though the school was just barely holding back the wilderness.

We walked quietly for a while, our feet crunching through thick, unbroken snow. A few birds flitted by, singing their greetings to the rising sun, but mostly all I saw were scraggly, snow-heavy evergreen trees. I had to work to keep up with Dimitri's longer stride, particularly since the snow slowed me down a little. Soon, I discerned a large, dark shape ahead. Some kind of building.

"What is that?" I asked. Before he could answer, I realized it was a small cabin, made out of logs and everything. Closer examination showed that the logs looked worn and rotten in some places. The roof sagged a little.

"Old watch-post," he said. "Guardians used to live on the edge of campus and keep watch for Strigoi."

"Why don't they anymore?"

"We don't have enough guardians to staff it. Besides, Moroi have warded campus with enough protective magic that most don't think it's necessary to have actual people on guard." Provided no humans staked the wards, I thought.

For a few brief moments, I entertained the hope that Dimitri was leading me off to some romantic getaway. Then I heard voices on the opposite side of the building. A familiar hum of feeling coursed into my mind. Lissa was there.

Dimitri and I rounded the corner of the building, coming up on a surprising scene. A small frozen pond lay there, and Christian and Lissa were ice skating on it. A woman I didn't know was with them, but her back was to me. All I could see was a wave of jet-black hair that arced around her when she skated to a graceful stop.

Lissa grinned when she saw me. "Rose!" Christian glanced over at me as she spoke, and I got the distinct impression he felt I was intruding on their romantic moment.

Lissa moved in awkward strides to the pond's edge. She wasn't so adept at skating.

I could only stare in bewilderment—and jealousy. "Thanks for inviting me to

the party."

"I figured you were busy," she said. "And this is secret anyway. We aren't supposed to be here." I could have told them that.

Christian skated up beside her, and the strange woman soon followed. "You bringing party crashers, Dimka?" she asked.

I wondered who she was talking to, until I heard Dimitri laugh. He didn't do it that often, and my surprise increased. "It's impossible to keep Rose away from places she shouldn't be. She always finds them eventually."

The woman grinned and turned around, flipping her long hair over one shoulder, so that I suddenly saw her face full-on. It took every ounce of my already dubiously held self-control not to react. Her heart-shaped face had large eyes exactly the same shade as Christian's, a pale wintry blue. The lips that smiled at me were delicate and lovely, glossed in a shade of pink that set off the rest of her features.

But across her left cheek, marring what would have otherwise been smooth, white skin were raised, purplish scars. Their shape and formation looked very much like someone had bitten into and torn out part of her cheek. Which, I realized, was exactly what had happened.

I swallowed. I suddenly knew who this was. It was Christian's aunt. When his parents had turned Strigoi, they'd come back for him, hoping to hide him away and turn him Strigoi when he was older. I didn't know all the details, but I knew his aunt had fended them off. As I'd observed before, though, Strigoi were deadly. She'd provided enough of a distraction until the guardians showed up, but she hadn't walked away without damage.

She extended her gloved hand to me. "Tasha Ozera," she said. "I've heard a lot about you, Rose."

I gave Christian a dangerous look, and Tasha laughed.

"Don't worry," she said. "It was all good."

"No, it wasn't," he countered.

She shook her head in exasperation. "Honestly, I don't know where he got such horrible social skills. He didn't learn them from me." That was obvious, I thought.

"What are you guys doing out here?" I asked.

"I wanted to spend some time with these two." A small frown wrinkled her forehead. "But I don't really like hanging around the school itself. They aren't always hospitable. . . ."

I didn't get that at first. School officials usually fell all over themselves when royals came to visit. Then I figured it out.

"Because . . . because of what happened . . ."

Considering the way everyone treated Christian because of his parents, I shouldn't have been surprised to find his aunt facing the same discrimination.

Tasha shrugged. "That's the way it is." She rubbed her hands together and exhaled, her breath making a frosty cloud in the air. "But let's not stand out here, not when we can build a fire inside."

I gave a last, wistful glance at the frozen pond and then followed the others inside. The cabin was pretty bare, covered in layers of dust and dirt. It consisted of only one room. There was a narrow bed with no covers in the corner and a few shelves where food had probably once been stored. There was a fireplace, however, and we soon had a blaze going that warmed the small area. The five of

us sat down, huddling around its heat, and Tasha produced a bag of marshmallows that we cooked over the flames.

As we feasted on that gooey goodness, Lissa and Christian talked to each other in that easy, comfortable way they always had. To my surprise, Tasha and Dimitri also talked in a familiar and light way. They obviously knew each other from way back when. I'd actually never seen him so animated before. Even when affectionate with me, there'd always been a serious air about him. With Tasha, he bantered and laughed.

The more I listened to her, the more I liked her. Finally, unable to stay out of the conversation, I asked, "So are you coming on the ski trip?"

She nodded. Stifling a yawn, she stretched herself out like a cat. "I haven't been skiing in ages. No time. Been saving all my vacation for this."

"Vacation?" I gave her a curious look. "Do you have . . . a job?"

"Sadly, yes," Tasha said, though she didn't actually sound very sad about it. "I teach martial arts classes."

I stared in astonishment. I couldn't have been more surprised if she'd said she was an astronaut or a telephone psychic.

A lot of royals just didn't work at all, and if they did, it was usually in some sort of investment or other moneymaking business that furthered their family fortunes. And those who *did* work certainly didn't do a lot of martial arts or physically demanding jobs. Moroi had a lot of great attributes: exceptional senses —smell, sight, and hearing—and the power to work magic. But physically, they were tall and slender, often small-boned. They also got weak from being in sunlight. Now, those things weren't enough to prevent someone from becoming a fighter, but they did make it more challenging. An idea had built up among the Moroi over time that their best offense was a good defense, and most shied away from the thought of physical conflict. They hid in well-protected places like the Academy, always relying on stronger, hardier dhampirs to guard them.

"What do you think, Rose?" Christian seemed highly amused by my surprise. "Think you could take her?"

"Hard to say," I said.

Tasha crooked me a grin. "You're being modest. I've seen what you guys can do. This is just a hobby I picked up."

Dimitri chuckled. "Now *you're* being modest. You could teach half the classes around here."

"Not likely," she said. "It'd be pretty embarrassing to be beaten up by a bunch of teenagers."

"I don't think that'd happen," he said. "I seem to remember you doing some damage to Neil Szelsky."

Tasha rolled her eyes. "Throwing my drink in his face wasn't actually damage—unless you consider the damage it did to his suit. And we all know how he is about his clothes."

They both laughed at some private joke the rest of us weren't in on, but I was only half-listening. I was still intrigued about her role with the Strigoi.

The self-control I'd tried to maintain finally slipped. "Did you start learning to fight before or after that happened to your face?"

"Rose!" hissed Lissa.

But Tasha didn't seem upset. Neither did Christian, and he usually grew

uncomfortable when the attack with his parents was brought up. She regarded me with a level, thoughtful look. It reminded me of the one I sometimes got from Dimitri if I did something surprising that he approved of.

"After," she said. She didn't lower her gaze or look embarrassed, though I sensed sadness in her. "How much do you know?"

I glanced at Christian. "The basics."

She nodded. "I knew . . . I knew what Lucas and Moira had become, but that still didn't prepare me. Mentally, physically, or emotionally. I think if I had to live through it again, I still wouldn't be ready. But after that night, I looked at myself — figuratively—and realized how defenseless I was. I'd spent my whole life expecting guardians to protect me and take care of me.

"And that's not to say the guardians aren't capable. Like I said, you could probably take me in a fight. But they—Lucas and Moira—cut down our two guardians before we realized what had happened. I stalled them from taking Christian— but just barely. If the others hadn't shown up, I'd be dead, and he'd —" She stopped, frowned, and kept going. "I decided that I didn't want to die that way, not without putting up a real fight and doing everything I could to protect myself and those I love. So I learned all sorts of self-defense. And after a while, I didn't really, uh, fit in so well with high society around here. So I moved to Minneapolis and made a living from teaching others."

I didn't doubt there were other Moroi living in Minneapolis—though God only knew why—but I could read between the lines. She'd moved there and integrated herself with humans, keeping away from other vampires like Lissa and I had for two years. I started to wonder also if there might have been something else there between the lines. She'd said she'd learned "all sorts of self-defense"—apparently, more than just martial arts. Going along with their offense-defense beliefs, the Moroi didn't think magic should be used as a weapon. Long ago, it had been used that way, and some Moroi still secretly did today. Christian, I knew, was one of them. I suddenly had a good idea of where he might have picked up that kind of thing.

Silence fell. It was hard to follow up a sad story like that. But Tasha, I realized, was one of those people who could always lighten a mood. It made me like her even more, and she spent the rest of the time telling us funny stories. She didn't put on airs like a lot of royals did, so she had lots of dirt on everyone. Dimitri knew a lot of the people she spoke of— honestly, how did someone so antisocial seem to know *everyone* in Moroi and guardian society?—and would occasionally add some small detail. They had us in hysterics until Tasha finally looked at her watch.

"Where's the best place a girl can go shopping around here?" she asked.

Lissa and I exchanged looks. "Missoula," we said in unison.

Tasha sighed. "That's a couple hours away, but if I leave soon, I can probably still get in some time before the stores close. I'm hopelessly behind in Christmas shopping."

I groaned. "I'd kill to go shopping."

"Me too," said Lissa.

"Maybe we could sneak along. . . ." I gave Dimitri a hopeful look.

"No," he said immediately. I gave a sigh of my own.

Tasha yawned again. "I'll have to grab some coffee, so I don't sleep on the drive

in."

"Can't one of your guardians drive for you?"

She shook her head. "I don't have any."

"Don't have any . . ." I frowned, parsing her words. "You don't have any guardians?"

"Nope."

I shot up. "But that's not possible! You're royal. You should have at least one. Two, really."

Guardians were distributed among Moroi in a cryptic, micromanaged way by the Guardian Council. It was kind of an unfair system, considering the ratio of guardians to Moroi. Non-royals tended to get them by a lottery system. Royals *always* got them. High-ranking royals often got more than one, but even the lowest-ranking member of royalty wouldn't have been without one.

"The Ozeras aren't exactly first in line when guardians get assigned," said Christian bitterly. "Ever since . . . my parents died . . . there's kind of been a shortage."

My anger flared up. "But that's not fair. They can't punish you for what your parents did."

"It's not punishment, Rose." Tasha didn't seem nearly as enraged as she should have been, in my opinion. "It's just . . . a rearranging of priorities."

"They're leaving you defenseless. You can't go out there by yourself!"

"I'm not defenseless, Rose. I've told you that. And if I really wanted a guardian, I could make a nuisance of myself, but it's a lot of hassle. I'm fine for now."

Dimitri glanced over at her. "You want me to go with you?"

"And keep you up all night?" Tasha shook her head. "I wouldn't do that to you, Dimka."

"He doesn't mind," I said quickly, excited about this solution.

Dimitri seemed amused by me speaking for him, but he didn't contradict me. "I really don't."

She hesitated. "All right. But we should probably go soon."

Our illicit party dispersed. The Moroi went one direction; Dimitri and I went another. He and Tasha made plans to meet up in a half hour.

"So what do you think of her?" he asked when we were alone.

"I like her. She's cool." I thought about her for a moment. "And I get what you mean about the marks."

"Oh?"

I nodded, watching my footing as we walked along the paths. Even when salted and shoveled, they could still collect hidden patches of ice.

"She didn't do what she did for glory. She did it because she had to. Just like . . . just like my mom did." I hated to admit it, but it was true. Janine Hathaway might be the worst mother ever, but she was a great guardian. "The marks don't matter. *Molnijas* or scars."

"You're a fast learner," he said with approval.

I swelled under his praise. "Why does she call you Dimka?"

He laughed softly. I'd heard a lot of his laughter tonight and decided I'd like to hear more of it.

"It's a nickname for Dimitri."

"That doesn't make any sense. It doesn't sound anything like Dimitri. You

should be called, I don't know, Dimi or something."

"That's not how it works in Russian," he said.

"Russian's weird." In Russian, the nickname for Vasilisa was Vasya, which made no sense to me.

"So is English."

I gave him a sly look. "If you'd teach me to swear in Russian, I might have a new appreciation for it."

"You swear too much already."

"I just want to express myself."

"Oh, Roza . . ." He sighed, and I felt a thrill tickle me. "Roza" was my name in Russian. He rarely used it. "You express yourself more than anyone else I know."

I smiled and walked on a bit without saying anything else. My heart skipped a beat, I was so happy to be around him. There was something warm and *right* about us being together.

Even as I floated along, my mind churned over something else that I'd been thinking about. "You know, there's something funny about Tasha's scars."

"What's that?" he asked.

"The scars . . . they mess up her face," I began slowly. I was having trouble putting my thoughts into words. "I mean, it's obvious she used to be really pretty. But even with the scars now . . . I don't know. She's pretty in a different way. It's like . . . like they're part of her. They complete her." It sounded silly, but it was true.

Dimitri didn't say anything, but he gave me a sidelong glance. I returned it, and as our eyes met, I saw the briefest glimpse of the old attraction. It was fleeting and gone too soon, but I'd seen it. Pride and approval replaced it, and they were almost as good.

When he spoke, it was to echo his earlier thoughts. "You're a fast learner, Roza."

SIX

I WAS FEELING PRETTY GOOD ABOUT life when I headed to my before-school practice the next day. The secret gathering last night had been super fun, and I felt proudly responsible for fighting the system and encouraging Dimitri to go with Tasha. Better still, I'd gotten my first crack at a silver stake yesterday and had proven I could handle one. High on myself, I couldn't wait to practice even more.

Once I was dressed in my usual workout attire, I practically skipped down to the gym. But when I stuck my head inside the practice room from the day before, I found it dark and quiet. Flipping on the light, I peered around just in case Dimitri was conducting some kind of weird, covert training exercise. Nope. Empty. No staking today.

"Shit," I muttered.

"He's not here."

I yelped and nearly jumped ten feet in the air. Turning around, I looked straight into my mother's narrowed brown eyes.

"What are you doing here?" As soon as the words were out of my mouth, her appearance registered with me. A stretchy spandex shirt with short sleeves. Loose, drawstring workout pants similar to the ones I wore. "Shit," I said again.

"Watch your mouth," she snapped. "You might behave like you have no manners, but at least try not to sound that way."

"Where's Dimitri?"

"*Guardian Belikov* is in bed. He just got back a couple of hours ago and needed to sleep."

Another expletive was on my lips, and I bit it back. Of course Dimitri was asleep. He'd had to drive with Tasha to Missoula during daylight in order to be there during human shopping hours. He'd technically been up all of the Academy's night and had probably only just gotten back. Ugh. I wouldn't have been so quick to encourage him to help her if I'd known it'd result in *this*.

"Well," I said hastily. "I guess that means practice is canceled—"

"Be quiet and put these on." She handed me some training mitts. They were similar to boxing gloves but not as thick and bulky. They shared the same purpose, however: to protect your hands and keep you from gouging your opponent with your nails.

"We've been working on silver stakes," I said sulkily, shoving my hands into the mitts.

"Well, today we're doing this. Come on."

Wishing I'd been hit by a bus on my walk from the dorm today, I followed her out toward the center of the gym. Her curly hair was pinned up to stay out of the way, revealing the back of her neck. The skin there was covered in tattoos. The top one was a serpentine line: the promise mark, given when guardians graduated from academies like St. Vladimir's and agreed to serve. Below that were the *molnija* marks awarded each time a guardian killed a Strigoi. They were shaped like the lightning bolts they took their name from. I couldn't gauge exact numbers, but let's just say it was a wonder my mom had any neck left to tattoo. She'd wielded a lot of death in her time.

When she reached the spot she wanted, she turned toward me and adopted an attack stance. Half expecting her to jump me then and there, I quickly mirrored it.

"What are we doing?" I asked.

"Basic offensive and defensive parrying. Use the red lines."

"That's all?" I asked.

She leapt toward me. I dodged—just barely—and tripped over my own feet in the process. Hastily, I righted myself.

"Well," she said in a voice that *almost* sounded sarcastic. "As you seem so keen on reminding me, I haven't seen you in five years. I have no idea what you can do."

She moved on me again, and again I just barely kept within the lines in escaping her. That quickly became the pattern. She never really gave me the chance to go on the offensive. Or maybe I just didn't have the skills to take the offensive. I spent all my time defending myself—physically, at least. Grudgingly, I had to acknowledge to myself that she was good. *Really* good. But I certainly wasn't going to tell her that.

"So, what?" I asked. "This is your way of making up for maternal negligence?"

"This is my way of making you get rid of that chip on your shoulder. You've had nothing but attitude for me since I arrived. You want to fight?" Her fist shot out and connected with my arm. "Then we'll fight. Point."

"Point," I conceded, backing up to my side. "I don't want to fight. I've just been trying to talk to you."

"Mouthing off to me in class isn't what I'd really call talking. Point."

I grunted from the hit. When I'd first begun training with Dimitri, I'd complained that it wasn't fair for me to fight someone a foot taller than me. He'd pointed out that I'd fight plenty of Strigoi taller than me and that the old adage was true: size doesn't matter. Sometimes I thought he was giving me false hope, but judging from my mom's performance here, I was starting to believe him.

I'd never actually fought anyone smaller than me. As one of the few girls in the novice classes, I accepted that I was almost always going to be shorter and slimmer than my opponents. But my mother was smaller still and clearly had nothing but muscle packed into her petite body.

"I have a unique style of communication, that's all," I said.

"You have a petty teenage delusion that you've somehow been wronged for the last seventeen years." Her foot hit my thigh. "Point. When in reality, you've been treated no differently than any other dhampir. Better, actually. I could have sent you off to live with my cousins. You want to be a blood whore? Is that what you wanted?"

The term “blood whore” always made me flinch. It was a term often applied to the single dhampir mothers who decided to raise their children instead of becoming guardians. These women often had short-term affairs with Moroi men and were looked down on for it—even though there wasn’t really anything else they could have done, since Moroi men usually ended up marrying Moroi women. The “blood whore” term came from the fact that some dhampir women let men drink blood from them during sex. In our world, only humans gave blood. A dhampir doing it was dirty and kinky—especially during sex. I suspected only a few dhampir women actually did this, but unfairly, the term tended to get applied to all of them. I had given blood to Lissa when we had run away, and although it had been a necessary act, the stigma still stayed with me.

“No. Of course I don’t want to be a blood whore.” My breathing was becoming heavy. “And they’re not all like that. There’re only a few that actually are.”

“They bring that reputation on themselves,” she growled. I dodged her strike. “They should be doing their duty as guardians, not continuing to fool around and have flings with Moroi.”

“They’re raising their children,” I grunted. I wanted to yell but couldn’t waste the oxygen. “Something you’d know nothing about. Besides, aren’t you the same as they are? I don’t see a ring on your finger. Wasn’t my dad just a fling for you?”

Her face turned hard, which is saying something when you’re already beating up your daughter. “*That*,” she said tightly, “is something *you* know nothing about. Point.”

I winced at the blow but was happy to see I’d struck a nerve. I had no clue who my dad was. The only bit of information I had was that he was Turkish. I might have my mom’s curvy figure and pretty face—though I could smugly say mine was much prettier than hers nowadays—but the rest of my coloring was from him. Lightly tanned skin with dark hair and eyes.

“How’d it happen?” I asked. “Were you on some assignment in Turkey? Meet him at a local bazaar? Or was it even cheaper than that? Did you go all Darwin and select the guy most likely to pass on warrior genes to your offspring? I mean, I know you only had me because it was your *duty*, so I suppose you had to make sure you could give the guardians the best specimen you could.”

“Rosemarie,” she warned through gritted teeth, “for once in your life, shut up.”

“Why? Am I tarnishing your precious reputation? It’s just like you told me: you aren’t any different from any other dhampir either. You just screwed him and—”

There’s a reason they say, “Pride goeth before a fall.” I was so caught up in my own cocky triumph that I stopped paying attention to my feet. I was too close to the red line. Going outside of it was another point for her, so I scrambled to stay within and dodge her at the same time. Unfortunately, only one of those could work. Her fist came flying at me, fast and hard—and, perhaps most importantly, a bit higher than the permissable according to rules of this kind of exercise. It smacked me in the face with the power of a small truck, and I flew backward, hitting the hard gym floor back-first and head-second. And I was out of the lines. Damn it.

Pain cracked through the back of my head, and my vision went blurry and sparkly. Within seconds, my mother was leaning over me.

“Rose? Rose? Are you okay?” Her voice sounded hoarse and frantic. The world swam.

At some point after that, other people came, and I somehow wound up in the Academy's med clinic. There, someone shone a light in my eyes and started asking me incredibly idiotic questions.

"What's your name?"

"What?" I asked, squinting at the light.

"Your name." I recognized Dr. Olendzki peering over me.

"You know my name."

"I want you to tell me."

"Rose. Rose Hathaway."

"Do you know your birthday?"

"Of course I do. Why are you asking me such stupid things? Did you lose my records?"

Dr. Olendzki gave an exasperated sigh and walked off, taking the annoying light with her. "I think she's fine," I heard her tell someone. "I want to keep her here for the school day, just to make sure she doesn't have a concussion. I certainly don't want her anywhere near her guardian classes."

I spent the day moving in and out of sleep because Dr. Olendzki kept waking me up to do her tests. She also gave me an ice pack and told me to keep it close to my face. When the Academy's classes let out, she deemed me well enough to leave.

"I swear, Rose, I think you should have a frequent patient's card." There was a small smile on her face. "Short of those with chronic problems like allergies and asthma, I don't think there's any other student I've seen here so often in such a short period of time."

"Thanks," I said, not really sure I wanted the honor. "So, no concussion?"

She shook her head. "No. You're going to have some pain, though. I'll give you something for that before you go." Her smile faded, and suddenly she looked nervous. "To be honest, Rose, I think most of the damage happened to, well, your face."

I shot up from the bed. "What do you mean 'most of the damage happened to my face'?"

She gestured to the mirror above the sink on the far side of the room. I ran over to it and looked at my reflection.

"Son of a bitch!"

Purplish red splotches covered the upper portion of the left side of my face, particularly near the eye. Desperately, I turned around to face her.

"This is going to go away soon, right? If I keep the ice on it?"

She shook her head again. "The ice can help . . . but I'm afraid you're going to have a wicked black eye. It'll probably be at its worst tomorrow but should clear up in a week or so. You'll be back to normal before long."

I left the clinic in a daze that had nothing to do with my head injury. Clear up in a week or so? How could Dr. Olendzki speak so lightly about this? Didn't she realize what was happening? I was going to look like a mutant for Christmas and most of the ski trip. I had a black eye. A freaking black eye.

And my mother had given it to me.

SEVEN

I ANGRILY PUSHED THROUGH THE DOUBLE doors that led into the Moroi dorm. Snow swirled in behind me, and a few people lingering on the main floor glanced up upon my entrance. Not surprisingly, several of them did double takes. Swallowing, I forced myself not to react. It would be okay. No need to freak out. Novices got injured all the time. It was actually rarer *not* to get injured. Admittedly, this was a more noticeable injury than most, but I could live with it until it healed, right? And it wasn't like anyone would know how I'd received it.

"Hey Rose, is it true your own mother punched you?"

I froze. I'd know that taunting soprano voice anywhere. Turning slowly, I looked into the deep blue eyes of Mia Rinaldi. Curly blond hair framed a face that might have been cute if not for the malicious smirk on it.

A year younger than us, Mia'd taken on Lissa (and me by default) in a war to see who could tear apart the other's life most quickly—a war, I should add, that *she* started. It had involved her stealing Lissa's ex-boyfriend—despite the fact Lissa had decided in the end she didn't want him—and the spreading of all sorts of rumors.

Admittedly, Mia's hatred hadn't been entirely unjustified. Lissa's older brother, Andre—who had been killed in the same car accident that technically "killed" me—had used Mia pretty badly when she was a freshman. If she weren't such a bitch now, I would have felt sorry for her. It had been wrong of him, and while I could understand her anger, I don't know that it was fair of her to take that out on Lissa in the way she did.

Lissa and I had technically won the war in the end, but Mia had inexplicably bounced back. She didn't run with the same elite that she once had, but she had rebuilt a small contingent of friends. Malicious or not, strong leaders always attract followers.

I'd found that about 90 percent of the time, the most effective response was to ignore her. But we had just crossed over to the other 10 percent, because it's impossible to ignore someone announcing to the world that your mother just punched you—even if it was true. I stopped walking and turned around. Mia stood near a vending machine, knowing she'd drawn me out. I didn't bother asking how she'd found out about my mother giving me the black eye. Things rarely stayed secret around here.

When she caught full sight of my face, her eyes widened in unabashed delight. "Wow. Talk about a face only a mother could love."

Ha. Cute. From anyone else, I would have applauded the joke.

"Well, you're the expert on face injury," I said. "How's your nose?"

Mia's icy smile twitched a little, but she didn't back down. I'd broken her nose about a month ago—at a school dance of all places—and while the nose had since healed, it now sat just the tiniest bit askew. Plastic surgery could probably fix it up, but from my understanding of her family's finances, that wasn't possible just now.

"It's better," she replied primly. "Fortunately, it was only broken by a psychopathic whore and not anyone actually related to me."

I gave her my best psychopathic smile. "Too bad. Family members hit you by accident. Psychopathic whores tend to come back for more."

Threatening physical violence against her was usually a pretty sound tactic, but we had too many people around right now for that to be a legitimate concern for her. And Mia knew it. Not that I was above attacking someone in this kind of setting—hell, I'd done it lots of times—but I *was* trying to work on my impulse control lately.

"Doesn't look like much of an accident to me," she said. "Don't you guys have rules about face punches? I mean, that looks *really* far out of bounds."

I opened my mouth to tell her off, but nothing came out. She had a point. My injury *was* far out of bounds; in that sort of combat, you aren't supposed to hit above the neck. This was *way* above that forbidden line.

Mia saw my hesitation, and it was like Christmas morning had come a week early for her. Until that moment, I don't think there'd ever been a time in our antagonistic relationship in which she'd rendered me speechless.

"Ladies," came a stern, female voice. The Moroi attending the front desk leaned over it and fixed us with a sharp look. "This is a lobby, not a lounge. Either go upstairs or go outside."

For a moment, breaking Mia's nose again sounded like the best idea in the world—to hell with detention or suspension. After a deep breath, I decided retreat was my most dignified action now. I stalked off toward the stairs leading up to the girls' dorm. Over my shoulder, I heard Mia call, "Don't worry, Rose. It'll go away. Besides, it's not your *face* guys are interested in."

Thirty seconds later, I beat on Lissa's door so hard, it was a wonder my fist didn't go through the wood. She opened it slowly and peered around.

"Is it just you out here? I thought there was an army at the—oh my God." Her eyebrows shot up when she noticed the left side of my face. "What happened?"

"You haven't heard already? You're probably the only one in the school who hasn't," I grumbled. "Just let me in."

Sprawling on her bed, I told her about the day's events. She was properly appalled.

"I heard you'd been hurt, but I figured it was one of your normal things," she said.

I stared up at the spackled ceiling, feeling miserable. "The worst part is, Mia was right. It wasn't an accident."

"What, you're saying your mom did it on purpose?" When I didn't answer, Lissa's voice turned incredulous. "Come on, she wouldn't do that. No way."

"Why? Because she's perfect Janine Hathaway, master of controlling her temper? The thing is, she's also perfect Janine Hathaway, master of fighting and

controlling her actions. One way or another, she slipped up."

"Yeah, well," said Lissa, "I think her stumbling and missing her punch is more likely than her doing it on purpose. She'd have to really lose her temper."

"Well, she *was* talking to me. That's enough to make anyone lose their temper. And I accused her of sleeping with my dad because he was the soundest evolutionary choice."

"Rose," groaned Lissa. "You kind of left out that part in your recap. Why'd you say that to her?"

"Because it's probably true."

"But you had to know it'd upset her. Why do you keep provoking her? Why can't you just make peace with her?"

I sat upright. "Make peace with her? *She gave me a black eye.* Probably on purpose! How do I make peace with someone like that?"

Lissa just shook her head and walked over to the mirror to check her makeup. The feelings coming through our bond were ones of frustration and exasperation. Lingering in the back was a bit of anticipation, too. I had the patience to examine her carefully, now that I'd finished my venting. She had on a silky lavender shirt and a knee-length black skirt. Her long hair had the kind of smooth perfection only achieved by spending an hour of your life on it with a hair dryer and flat iron.

"You look nice. What's up?"

Her feelings shifted slightly, her irritation with me dimming a little. "I'm meeting Christian soon."

For a few minutes there, it had felt like the old days with Lissa and me. Just us, hanging out and talking. Her mention of Christian, as well as the realization that she'd have to leave me soon for *him*, stirred up dark feelings in my chest . . . feelings I had to reluctantly admit were jealousy. Naturally, I didn't let on to that.

"Wow. What'd he do to deserve that? Rescue orphans from a burning building? If so, you might want to make sure he didn't set the building on fire in the first place." Christian's element was fire. It was fitting since it was the most destructive one.

Laughing, she turned from the mirror and noticed me gently touching my swollen face with my fingers. Her smile turned kind. "It doesn't look that bad."

"Whatever. I can tell when you're lying, you know. And Dr. Olendzki says it'll be even worse tomorrow." I lay back down on the bed. "There probably isn't enough concealer in the world to cover this, is there? Tasha and I'll have to invest in some *Phantom of the Opera*-style masks."

She sighed and sat on the bed near me. "Too bad I can't just heal it."

I smiled. "That would be nice."

The compulsion and charisma brought on by spirit were great, but really, healing was her coolest ability. The range of things she could achieve was staggering.

Lissa was also thinking about what spirit could do. "I wish there were some other way to control the spirit . . . in a way that still let me use the magic. . . ."

"Yeah," I said. I understood her burning desire to do great things and help people. It radiated off of her. Hell, I would also have liked to have this eye cleared up in an instant rather than days. "I wish there were too."

She sighed again. "And there's more to me than just wishing I could heal and

do other stuff with spirit. I also, well, just miss the magic. It's still there; it's just blocked off by the pills. It's burning inside of me. It wants me, and I want it. But there's a wall between us. You just can't imagine it."

"I can, actually."

It was true. Along with having a general sense for her feelings, I could sometimes also "slip into her." It was hard to explain and ever harder to endure. When that happened, I could literally see through her eyes and *feel* what she experienced. During those times, I *was* her. Many times, I'd been in her head while she longed for the magic, and I'd felt the burning need she spoke of. She often woke up at night, yearning for the power she could no longer reach.

"Oh yeah," she said ruefully. "I forget about that sometimes. "

A sense of bitterness filled her. It wasn't directed at me so much as it was the no-win nature of her situation. Anger sparked inside of her. She didn't like feeling helpless any more than I did. The anger and frustration intensified into something darker and uglier, something I didn't like.

"Hey," I said, touching her arm. "You okay?"

She closed her eyes briefly, then opened them. "I just hate it."

The intensity of her feelings reminded me of our conversation, the one we'd had just before I went to the Badica house. "You still feel like the pills might be weakening?"

"I don't know. A little."

"Is it getting worse?"

She shook her head. "No. I still can't use the magic. I feel *closer* to it . . . but it's still blocked off."

"But you still . . . your moods . . ."fit

"Yeah . . . they're acting up. But don't worry," she said, seeing my face. "I'm not seeing things or trying to hurt myself."

"Good." I was glad to hear it but still worried. Even if she still couldn't touch the magic, I didn't like the idea of her mental state slipping again. Desperately, I hoped the situation would just stabilize on its own. "I'm here," I told her softly, holding her gaze. "If anything happens that's weird . . . you tell me, okay?"

Like that, the dark feelings disappeared within her. As they did, I felt a weird ripple in the bond. I can't explain what it was, but I shuddered from the force. Lissa didn't notice. Her mood perked up again, and she smiled at me.

"Thanks," she said. "I will."

I smiled, happy to see her back to normal. We lapsed into silence, and for the briefest of moments, I wanted to pour my heart out to her. I'd had so much on my mind lately: my mother, Dimitri, and the Badica house. I'd been keeping those feelings locked up, and they were tearing me apart. Now, feeling so comfortable with Lissa for the first time in a long time, I finally felt that I could let her into *my* feelings for a change.

Before I could open my mouth, I felt her thoughts suddenly shift. They became eager and nervous. She had something she wanted to tell me, something she'd been thinking about intently. So much for pouring my heart out. If she wanted to talk, I wouldn't burden her with my problems, so I pushed them aside and waited for her to speak.

"I found something in my research with Ms. Carmack. Something strange . . ."

"Oh?" I asked, instantly curious.

Moroi usually developed their specialized element during adolescence. After that, they were put into magic classes specific to that element. But as the only spirit user on record at the moment, Lissa didn't really have a class she could join. Most people believed she just hadn't specialized, but she and Ms. Carmack—the magic teacher at St. Vladimir's—had been meeting independently to learn what they could about spirit. They researched both current and old records, checking for clues that might lead to other spirit users, now that they knew some of the telltale signs: an inability to specialize, mental instability, etc.

"I didn't find any confirmed spirit users, but I did find . . . reports of, um, unexplained phenomena."

I blinked in surprise. "What kind of stuff?" I asked, pondering what would count as "unexplained phenomena" for vampires. When she and I had lived with humans, *we* would have been considered unexplained phenomena.

"They're scattered reports . . . but, like, I read this one about a guy who could make others see things that weren't there. He could get them to believe they were seeing monsters or other people or whatever."

"That could be compulsion."

"*Really* powerful compulsion. I couldn't do that, and I'm stronger—or used to be—in it than anyone we know. And that power comes from using spirit. . . ."

"So," I finished, "you think this illusion guy must have been a spirit user too." She nodded. "Why not contact him and find out?"

"Because there's no information listed! It's secret. And there are others just as strange. Like someone who could physically drain others. People standing nearby would get weak and lose all their strength. They'd pass out. And there was someone else who could stop things in midair when they were thrown at him." Excitement lit up her features.

"He could have been an air user," I pointed out.

"Maybe," she said. I could feel the curiosity and excitement swirling through her. She desperately wanted to believe there were others out there like her.

I smiled. "Who knew? Moroi have Roswell- and Area 51- type stuff. It's a wonder I'm not being studied somewhere to see if they can figure out the bond."

Lissa's speculative mood turned teasing. "I wish I could see into *your* mind sometimes. I'd like to know how you feel about Mason."

"He's my friend," I said stoutly, surprised at the abrupt change in subject. "That's it."

She tsked. "You used to flirt—and do other stuff—with any guy you could get your hands on."

"Hey!" I said, offended. "I wasn't that bad."

"Okay . . . maybe not. But you don't seem interested in guys anymore."

I *was* interested in guys—well, one guy.

"Mason's really nice," she continued. "And crazy about you."

"He is," I agreed. I thought about Mason, about that brief moment when I'd thought he was sexy outside Stan's class. Plus, Mason was really funny, and we got along beautifully. He wasn't a bad prospect as far as boyfriends went.

"You guys are a lot alike. You're both doing things you shouldn't."

I laughed. That was also true. I recalled Mason's eagerness to take on every Strigoi in the world. I might not be ready for that—despite my outburst in the car—but I shared some of his recklessness. It might be time to give him a shot, I

thought. Bantering with him was fun, and it had been a long time since I'd kissed anyone. Dimitri made my heart ache . . . but, well, it wasn't like anything else was going on there.

Lissa watched me appraisingly, like she knew what I was thinking—well, aside from the Dimitri stuff. "I heard Meredith say you were an idiot for not going out with him. She said it's because you think you're too good for him."

"What! That's not true."

"Hey, *I* didn't say it. Anyway, she said she's thinking of going after him."

"Mason and Meredith?" I scoffed. "That's a disaster in the making. They have nothing in common."

It was petty, but I'd gotten used to Mason always doting on me. Suddenly, the thought of someone else getting him irked me.

"You're possessive," Lissa said, again guessing my thoughts. No wonder she got so annoyed at me reading her mind.

"Only a little."

She laughed. "Rose, even if it's not Mason, you really should start dating again. There are lots of guys who would kill to go out with you—guys who are actually nice."

I hadn't always made the best choices when it came to men. Once again, the urge to spill all my worries to her seized me. I'd been hesitant to tell her about Dimitri for so long, even though the secret burned inside of me. Sitting with her here reminded me that she *was* my best friend. I could tell her anything, and she wouldn't judge me. But, just like earlier, I lost the chance to tell her what was on my mind.

She glanced over at her alarm clock and suddenly sprang up from the bed.

"I'm late! I've got to meet Christian!"

Joy filled her, underscored with a bit of nervous anticipation. Love. What could you do? I swallowed back the jealousy that started to raise its ugly head. Once again, Christian had taken her away from me. I wasn't going to be able to unburden myself tonight.

Lissa and I left the dorm, and she practically sprinted away, promising we'd talk tomorrow. I wandered back to my own dorm. When I got to my room, I passed by my mirror and groaned when I saw my face. Dark purple surrounded my eye. In talking to Lissa, I'd almost forgotten about the whole incident with my mother. Stopping to get a closer look, I stared at my face. Maybe it was egotistical, but I knew I looked good. I wore a C-cup and had a body much coveted in a school where most of the girls were supermodel slim. And as I'd noted earlier, my face was pretty too. On a typical day, I was a nine around here—ten on a very good one.

But today? Yeah. I was practically in negative numbers. I was going to look fabulous for the ski trip.

"My mom beat me up," I informed my reflection. It looked back sympathetically.

With a sigh, I decided I might as well get ready for bed. There was nothing else I wanted to do tonight, and maybe extra sleep would speed the healing. I went down the hall to the bathroom to wash my face and brush my hair. When I got back to my room, I slipped on my favorite pajamas, and the feel of soft flannel cheered me up a little.

I was packing my backpack for the next day when a burst of emotion abruptly shot through my bond with Lissa. It caught me unaware and gave me no chance to fight it. It was like being knocked over by a hurricane-force wind, and suddenly, I was no longer looking at my backpack. I was “inside” Lissa, experiencing her world firsthand.

And that’s when things got awkward.

Because Lissa was with Christian.

And things were getting . . . hot.

EIGHT

CHRISTIAN WAS KISSING HER, AND I was in the kiss. He wasn't missing around. It was the kind of kiss that small children shouldn't be allowed to see. Hell, it was the kind of kiss *no one* should be allowed to see—let alone experience through a psychic link.

As I've noted before, strong emotion from Lissa could make this phenomenon happen—the one where I got pulled inside her head. But always, *always*, it was because of some negative emotion. She'd get upset or angry or depressed, and that would reach out to me. But this time? She wasn't upset.

She was happy. Very, very happy.

Oh man. I needed to get out of here.

They were up in the attic of the school's chapel or, as I liked to call it, their love nest. The place had been a regular hangout for them, back when each of them was feeling antisocial and wanted to escape. Eventually, they'd decided to be antisocial together, and one thing had led to another. Since they started publicly dating, I hadn't known they spent much time here anymore. Maybe they were back for old time's sake.

And indeed, a celebration did seem to be going on. Little scented candles were set up around the dusty old place, candles that filled the air with the scent of lilacs. I would have been a little nervous about setting all those candles in a confined space filled with flammable boxes and books, but Christian probably figured he could control any accidental infernos.

They finally broke that insanely long kiss and pulled back to look at each other. They lay on their sides on the floor. Several blankets had been spread under them.

Christian's face was open and tender as he regarded Lissa, his pale blue eyes aglow with some inner emotion. It was different from the way Mason regarded me. There was certainly adoration with him, but Mason's was a lot like when you walk into a church and fall to your knees in awe and fear of something you worship but don't really understand. Christian clearly worshipped Lissa in his way, but there was a knowing glint to his eyes, a sense that the two of them shared an understanding of each other so perfect and powerful that they didn't even need words to convey it.

"Don't you think we're going to go to hell for this?" asked Lissa.

He reached out and touched her face, trailing his fingers along her cheek and neck and down to the top of her silky shirt. She breathed heavily at that touch, at

the way it could be so gentle and small, yet evoke such a strong passion within her.

"For this?" He played with the shirt's edge, letting his finger just barely brush inside of it.

"No," she laughed. "For *this*." She gestured around the attic. "This is a church. We shouldn't be doing this kind of, um, thing up here."

"Not true," he argued. Gently, he pushed her onto her back and leaned over her. "The church is downstairs. This is just storage. God won't mind."

"You don't believe in God," she chastised. Her hands made their way down his chest. Her movements were as light and deliberate as his, yet they clearly triggered the same powerful response in him.

He sighed happily as her hands slid under his shirt and up his stomach. "I'm humoring you."

"You'd say anything right now," she accused. Her fingers caught the edge of his shirt and pushed it up. He shifted so she could push it all the way off him and then leaned back over her, bare-chested.

"You're right," he agreed. He carefully undid one button on her blouse. Just one. Then he again leaned down and gave her one of those hard, deep kisses. When he came up for air, he continued on as though nothing had happened. "Tell me what you need to hear, and I'll say it." He unfastened another button.

"There's nothing I *need* to hear," she laughed. Another button popped free. "You can tell me whatever you want—it'd just be nice if it were true."

"The truth, huh? No one wants to hear the truth. The truth is never sexy. But you . . ." The last button came undone, and he spread her shirt away. "You are too goddamned sexy to be real."

His words held his trademark snarky tone, but his eyes conveyed a different message entirely. I was witnessing this scene through Lissa's eyes, but I could imagine what he saw. Her smooth, white skin. Slender waist and hips. A lacy white bra. Through her, I could feel that the lace was itchy, but she didn't care.

Feelings both fond and hungry spread over his features. From within Lissa, I could feel her heart race and breathing quicken. Emotions similar to Christian's clouded all other coherent thoughts. Shifting down, he lay on top of her, pressing their bodies together. His mouth sought hers out again, and as their lips and tongues made contact, I knew I *had* to get out of there.

Because I understood it now. I understood why Lissa had dressed up and why the love nest had been decked out like a Yankee Candles showroom. This was it. *The* moment. After a month of dating, they were going to have sex. Lissa, I knew, had done it before with a past boyfriend. I didn't know Christian's past, but I sincerely doubted many girls had fallen prey to his abrasive charm.

But in feeling what Lissa felt, I could tell that none of that mattered. Not in that moment. In that moment, there were only the two of them and the way they felt about each other right now. And in a life filled with more worries than someone her age should have had, Lissa felt absolutely certain about what she was doing now. It was what she wanted. What she'd wanted for a very long time with him.

And I had *no* right to be witnessing it.

Who was I kidding? I didn't *want* to witness it. I took no pleasure in watching other people get it on, and I sure as hell didn't want to experience sex with Christian. It'd be like losing my virginity virtually.

But Jesus Christ, Lissa wasn't making it easy to get out of her head. She had no desire to detach from her feelings and emotions, and the stronger they grew, the stronger they held me. Trying to distance myself from her, I focused my energies on coming back to myself, concentrating as hard as I could.

More clothes disappeared . . .

Come on, come on, I told myself sternly.

The condom came out . . . yikes.

You're your own person, Rose. Get back in your head.

Their limbs intertwined, their bodies moving together . . .

Son of a—

I ripped out of her and back to myself. Once again, I was back in my room, but I no longer had any interest in packing my backpack. My whole world was askew. I felt strange and violated—almost unsure if I was Rose or if I was Lissa. I also felt that resentment toward Christian again. I certainly didn't want to have sex with Lissa, but there was that same pang inside of me, that frustrated feeling that I was no longer the center of her world.

Leaving the backpack untouched, I went right to bed, wrapping my arms around myself and curling into a ball to try to squelch the ache within my chest.

I fell asleep pretty quickly and woke up early as a result. Usually, I had to be dragged out of bed to go meet Dimitri, but today I showed up early enough that I actually beat him to the gym. As I waited, I saw Mason cutting across to one of the buildings that held classrooms.

"Whoa," I called. "Since when are you up this early?"

"Since I had to retake a math test," he said, walking over to me. He gave me his mischievous smile. "Might be worth skipping, though, to hang out with you."

I laughed, remembering my conversation with Lissa. Yes, there were definitely worse things I could do than flirt and start something with Mason.

"Nah. You might get in trouble, then I'd have no real challenge on the slopes."

He rolled his eyes, still smiling. "*I'm* the one with no real challenge, remember?"

"You ready to bet on something yet? Or are you still too afraid?"

"Watch it," he warned, "or I might take back your Christmas present."

"You got me a present?" I hadn't expected that.

"Yup. But if you keep back-talking, I might give it to someone else."

"Like Meredith?" I teased.

"She isn't even in your league, and you know it."

"Even with a black eye?" I asked with a grimace.

"Even with two black eyes."

The look he gave me just then wasn't teasing or even really suggestive. It was just nice. Nice, friendly, and interested. Like he really cared. After all the stress lately, I decided I liked being cared about. And with the neglect I was starting to feel from Lissa, I realized I also kind of liked having someone who wanted to pay so much attention to me.

"What are you doing on Christmas?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Nothing. My mom almost came down but had to cancel at the last minute . . . you know, with everything that happened."

Mason's mother wasn't a guardian. She was a dhampir who'd chosen to just be domestic and have kids. As a result, I knew he saw her quite a bit. It was ironic, I

thought, that my mom actually *was* here, but for all intents and purposes, she might as well have been somewhere else.

"Come hang with me," I said on impulse. "I'll be with Lissa and Christian and his aunt. It'll be fun."

"Really?"

"Very fun."

"That's not what I was asking about."

I grinned. "I know. Just be there, okay?"

He swept me one of the gallant bows he liked to make. "Absolutely."

Mason wandered off just as Dimitri showed up for our practice. Talking to Mason had made me feel giddy and happy; I hadn't thought about my face at all with him. But with Dimitri, I suddenly became self-conscious. I didn't want to be anything less than perfect with him, and as we walked inside, I went out of my way to avert my face so he couldn't look at me full-on. Worrying about that brought my mood down, and as it plummeted, all the other things that had been upsetting me came tumbling back.

We returned to the training room with the dummies, and he told me he simply wanted me to practice the maneuvers from two days ago. Happy he wasn't going to bring up the fight, I set to my task with a burning zeal, showing the dummies just what would happen if they messed with Rose Hathaway. I knew my fighting fury was fired up by more than just a simple desire to do well. My feelings were out of control this morning, raw and intense after both the fight with my mother and what I'd witnessed with Lissa and Christian last night. Dimitri sat back and watched me, occasionally critiquing my technique and offering suggestions for new tactics.

"Your hair's in the way," he said at one point. "Not only are you blocking your peripheral vision, you're running the risk of letting your enemy get a handhold."

"If I'm actually in a fight, I'll wear it up." I grunted as I shoved the stake neatly up between the dummy's "ribs." I didn't know what these artificial bones were made of, but they were a bitch to work around. I thought about my mom again and added a little extra force to the jab. "I'm just wearing it down today, that's all."

"Rose," he said warningly. Ignoring him, I plunged again. His voice came more sharply the next time he spoke. "*Rose*. Stop."

I backed away from the dummy, surprised to find my breathing labored. I hadn't realized I was working that hard. My back hit the wall. With nowhere to go, I looked away from him, directing my eyes toward the ground.

"Look at me," he ordered.

"Dimitri—"

"*Look at me*."

No matter our close history, he was still my instructor. I couldn't refuse a direct order. Slowly, reluctantly, I turned toward him, still tilting my head slightly down so the hair hung over the sides of my face. Rising from his chair, he walked over and stood before me.

I avoided his eyes but saw his hand move forward to brush back my hair. Then it stopped. As did my breathing. Our short-lived attraction had been filled with questions and reservations, but one thing I'd known for sure: Dimitri had loved my hair. Maybe he still loved it. It was great hair, I'll admit. Long and silky and

dark. He used to find excuses to touch it, and he'd counseled me against cutting it as so many female guardians did.

His hand hovered there, and the world stood still as I waited to see what he would do. After what seemed like an eternity, he let his hand gradually fall back to his side. Burning disappointment washed over me, yet at the same time, I'd learned something. He'd hesitated. He'd been afraid to touch me, which maybe—just maybe—meant he still wanted to. He'd had to hold himself back.

I slowly tipped my head back so that we made eye contact. Most of my hair fell back from my face—but not all. His hand trembled again, and I hoped again he'd reach forward. The hand steadied. My excitement dimmed.

"Does it hurt?" he asked. The scent of that aftershave, mingled with his sweat, washed over me. God, I wished he had touched me.

"No," I lied.

"It doesn't look so bad," he told me. "It'll heal."

"I hate her," I said, astonished at just how much venom those three words held. Even while suddenly turned on and wanting Dimitri, I still couldn't drop the grudge I held against my mother.

"No, you don't," he said gently.

"I *do*."

"You don't have time to hate anyone," he advised, his voice still kind. "Not in our profession. You should make peace with her."

Lissa had said exactly the same thing. Outrage joined my other emotions. That darkness within me started to unfurl. "Make peace with her? After she gave me a black eye *on purpose* ? Why am I the only one who sees how crazy that is?"

"She absolutely did *not* do it on purpose," he said, voice hard. "No matter how much you resent her, you have to believe that. She wouldn't do that, and anyway, I saw her later that day. She was worried about you."

"Probably more worried someone will bring her up on child abuse charges," I grumbled.

"Don't you think this is the time of year for forgiveness?"

I sighed loudly. "This isn't a Christmas special! This is my life. In the real world, miracles and goodness just don't happen. "

He was still eyeing my calmly. "In the real world, you can make your own miracles."

My frustration suddenly hit a breaking point, and I gave up trying to maintain my control. I was so tired of being told reasonable, practical things whenever something went wrong in my life. Somewhere in me, I knew Dimitri only wanted to help, but I just wasn't up for the well-meant words. I wanted comfort for my problems. I didn't want to think about what would make me a better person. I wished he'd just hold me and tell me not to worry.

"Okay, can you just stop this for once?" I demanded, hands on my hips.

"Stop what?"

"The whole profound Zen crap thing. You don't talk to me like a real person. Everything you say is just some wise, life-lesson nonsense. You really do sound like a Christmas special. " I knew it wasn't entirely fair to take my anger out on him, but I found myself practically shouting. "I swear, sometimes it's just like you want to hear yourself talk! And I *know* you're not always this way. You were perfectly normal when you talked to Tasha. But with me? You're just going

through the motions. You don't care about me. You're just stuck in your stupid mentor role."

He stared at me, uncharacteristically surprised. "I don't care about you?"

"No." I was being petty—very, very petty. And I knew the truth—that he *did* care and was more than just a mentor. I couldn't help myself, though. It just kept coming and coming. I jabbed his chest with my finger. "I'm another student to you. You just go on and on with your stupid life lessons so that—"

The hand I'd hoped would touch my hair suddenly reached out and grabbed my pointing hand. He pinned it to the wall, and I was surprised to see a flare of emotion in his eyes. It wasn't exactly anger . . . but it was frustration of another kind.

"*Don't* tell me what I'm feeling," he growled.

I saw then that half of what I'd said was true. He was almost always calm, always in control—even when fighting. But he'd also told me how he'd once snapped and beaten up his Moroi father. He'd actually been like me once—always on the verge of acting without thinking, doing things he knew he shouldn't.

"That's it, isn't it?" I asked.

"What?"

"You're always fighting for control. You're the same as me."

"No," he said, still obviously worked up. "I've learned my control."

Something about this new realization emboldened me. "No," I informed him. "You haven't. You put on a good face, and most of the time you do stay in control. But sometimes you can't. And sometimes . . ." I leaned forward, lowering my voice. "Sometimes you don't want to."

"Rose . . ."

I could see his labored breathing and knew his heart was beating as quickly as mine. And he wasn't pulling away. I knew this was wrong—knew all the logical reasons for us staying apart. But right then, I didn't care. I didn't want to control myself. I didn't want to be good.

Before he realized what was happening, I kissed him. Our lips met, and when I felt him kiss me back, I knew I was right. He pressed himself closer, trapping me between him and the wall. He kept holding my hand, but his other one snaked behind my head, sliding into my hair. The kiss was filled with so much intensity; it held anger, passion, release. . . .

He was the one who broke it. He jerked away from me and took several steps back, looking shaken.

"Do *not* do that again," he said stiffly.

"Don't kiss me back then," I retorted.

He stared at me for what seemed like forever. "I don't give 'Zen lessons' to hear myself talk. I don't give them because you're another student. I'm doing this to teach you control."

"You're doing a great job," I said bitterly.

He closed his eyes for half a second, exhaled, and muttered something in Russian. Without another glance at me, he turned and left the room.

NINE

I DIDN'T SEE DIMITRI FOR A while after that. He'd sent a message later that day saying that he thought we should cancel our next two sessions because of the rapidly approaching plans to leave campus. Classes were about to end anyway, he said; taking a break from practice seemed like the reasonable thing.

It was a lame excuse, and I knew that wasn't the reason he was canceling. If he wanted to avoid me, I would have preferred he made up something about how he and the other guardians had to up Moroi security or practice top-secret ninja moves.

Regardless of his story, I knew he was avoiding me because of the kiss. That damned kiss. I didn't regret it, not exactly. God only knew how much I'd been wanting to kiss him. But I'd done it for the wrong reasons. I'd done it because I was upset and frustrated and had simply wanted to prove that I *could*. I was so tired of doing the right thing, the smart thing. I was trying to be more in control lately, but I seemed to be slipping.

I hadn't forgotten the warning that he'd once given me— that us being together wasn't just about age. It would interfere with our jobs. Pushing him into the kiss . . . well, I'd fanned the flames of a problem that could eventually hurt Lissa. I shouldn't have done it. Yesterday, I'd been unable to stop myself. Today I could see more clearly and couldn't believe what I'd done.

Mason met me on Christmas morning, and we went to go hang out with the others. It provided a good opportunity to push Dimitri out of my head. I liked Mason—a lot. And it wasn't like I had to run off and marry him. Like Lissa had said, it would be healthy for me to just date someone again.

Tasha was hosting our Christmas brunch in an elegant parlor in the Academy's guest quarters. Lots of group activities and parties were occurring throughout the school, but I'd quickly noticed that Tasha's presence always created a disturbance. People either secretly stared or went out of their way to avoid her. Sometimes she would challenge them. Sometimes she would just lie low. Today, she'd chosen to stay out of the other royals' way and simply enjoy this small, private party of those who didn't shun her.

Dimitri had been invited to the gathering, and a bit of my resolve faltered when I saw him. He'd actually dressed up for the occasion. Okay, "dressed up" might have been an exaggeration, but it was the closest I'd ever seen him come to that. Usually he just looked a little rough . . . like he could spring into battle at any given moment. Today, his dark hair was tied at the back of his neck, as though

he'd actually tried to make it neat. He wore his usual jeans and leather boots, but instead of a T-shirt or thermal shirt, he had on a finely knit black sweater. It was just an ordinary sweater, nothing designer or expensive, but it added a touch of polish I didn't usually see, and good God, did it fit him well.

Dimitri wasn't mean to me or anything, but he certainly didn't go out of his way to make conversation with me. He did talk to Tasha, however, and I watched with fascination as they conversed in that easy way of theirs. I'd since learned that a good friend of his was a distant cousin of Tasha's family; that was how the two of them knew each other.

"Five?" asked Dimitri in surprise. They were discussing the friend's children. "I hadn't heard that."

Tasha nodded. "It's insane. I swear, I don't think his wife's had more than six months off between kids. She's short, too— so she just gets wider and wider."

"When I first met him, he swore he didn't even want kids."

Her eyes widened excitedly. "I *know*! I can't believe it. You should see him now. He just melts around them. I can't even understand him half the time. I swear, he speaks more baby talk than English."

Dimitri smiled his rare smile. "Well . . . children do that to people."

"I can't imagine it happening to *you*," she laughed. "You're always so stoic. Of course . . . I suppose you'd be doing baby talk in Russian, so no one would ever know."

They both laughed at that, and I turned away, grateful Mason was there to talk to. He was a good distraction from everything, because in addition to Dimitri ignoring me, Lissa and Christian were chatting on in their own little world too. Sex appeared to have made them that much more in love, and I wondered if I'd get to spend any time with her at all on the ski trip. She did eventually break away from him to give me my Christmas present.

I opened the box and stared inside. I saw a string of maroon-colored beads, and the scent of roses floated out.

"What the . . ."

I lifted the beads out, and a heavy gold crucifix swung from the end of them. She'd given me a *chotki*. It was similar to a rosary, only smaller. Bracelet-size.

"Are you trying to convert me?" I asked wryly. Lissa wasn't a religious nut or anything, but she believed in God and attended church regularly. Like many Moroi families who'd come from Russia and Eastern Europe, she was an Orthodox Christian.

Me? I was pretty much an Orthodox Agnostic. I figured God probably existed, but I didn't have the time or energy to investigate. Lissa respected that and never tried to push her faith on me, which made the gift that much weirder.

"Flip it over," she said, clearly amused at my shock.

I did. On the back of the cross, a dragon wreathed in flowers had been carved into the gold. The Dragomir crest. I looked up at her, puzzled.

"It's a family heirloom," she said. "One of my dad's good friends has been saving boxes of his stuff. This was in it. It belonged to my great-grandmother's guardian."

"Liss . . ." I said. The chotki took on a whole new meaning. "I can't . . . you can't give me something like this."

"Well, I certainly can't keep it. It's meant for a guardian. My guardian."

I wound the beads around one wrist. The cross felt cool against my skin.

"You know," I teased, "there's a good possibility I'll get kicked out of school before I can become your guardian."

She grinned. "Well, then you can give it back."

Everyone laughed. Tasha started to say something, then stopped when she looked up at the door.

"Janine!"

My mother stood there, looking as stiff and impassive as ever.

"Sorry I'm late," she said. "I had business to take care of."

Business. As always. Even on Christmas.

I felt my stomach turn and heat rise to my cheeks as the details of our fight came rushing back to my mind. She'd never sent one word of communication since it had happened two days ago, not even when I was in the infirmary. No apologies. Nothing. I gritted my teeth.

She sat down with us and soon joined in the conversation. I'd long since discovered she could really only talk about one subject: guardian business. I wondered if she had any hobbies. The Badica attack was on everyone's mind, and this drove her into a conversation about some similar fight she'd been in. To my horror, Mason was riveted by her every word.

"Well, decapitations aren't as easy as they seem," she said in her matter-of-fact way. I'd never thought they were easy at all, but her tone suggested that she believed everyone thought they were cake. "You've got to get through the spinal cord and tendons."

Through the bond, I felt Lissa grow queasy. She wasn't one for gruesome talk.

Mason's eyes lit up. "What's the best weapon to do it with?"

My mother considered. "An axe. You can get more weight behind it." She made a swinging motion by way of illustration.

"Cool," he said. "Man, I hope they let me carry an axe." It was a comical and ludicrous idea, since axes were hardly convenient weapons to carry around. For half a second, the thought of Mason walking down the street with an axe over his shoulder lightened my mood a little. The moment quickly passed.

I honestly couldn't believe we were having this conversation on Christmas. Her presence had soured everything. Fortunately, the gathering eventually dispersed. Christian and Lissa went off to do their own thing, and Dimitri and Tasha apparently had more catching up to do. Mason and I were well on our way to the dhampir dorm when my mother joined us.

None of us said anything. Stars cluttered the black sky, sharp and bright, their glitter matched in the ice and snow around us. I wore my ivory parka with fake fur trimming. It did a good job keeping my body warm, even though it did nothing against the chilly gusts that seared my face. The whole time we walked, I kept expecting my mother to turn off toward the other guardian areas, but she came right inside the dorm with us.

"I've been wanting to talk to you," she finally said. My alarms clicked on. What had I done now?

That was all she said, but Mason picked up on the hint immediately. He was neither stupid nor oblivious to social cues, though at that moment, I kind of wished he was. I also found it ironic that he wanted to fight every Strigoi in the world but was afraid of my mother.

He glanced at me apologetically, shrugged, and said, “Hey, I’ve got to get, um, somewhere. I’ll see you later.”

I watched with regret as he left, wishing I could run after him. Probably my mom would only tackle me and punch my other eye if I tried to escape. Better to do things her way and get this over with. Shifting uncomfortably, I looked everywhere but at her and waited for her to speak. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a few people glancing over at us. Recalling how everyone in the world seemed to know about her giving me the black eye, I suddenly decided I didn’t want witnesses around for whatever lecture she was about to unleash on me.

“You want to, um, go to my room?” I asked.

She looked surprised, almost uncertain. “Sure.”

I led her upstairs, keeping a safe distance away as we walked. Awkward tension built between us. She didn’t say anything when we reached my room, but I saw her examine every detail carefully, as though a Strigoi might be lurking in there. I sat on the bed and waited while she paced, unsure what I should do. She ran her fingers over a stack of books on animal behavior and evolution.

“Are these for a report?” she asked.

“No. I’m just interested in it, that’s all.”

Her eyebrows rose. She hadn’t known that. But how would she? She didn’t know anything about me. She continued her appraisal, stopping to study little things that apparently surprised her about me. A picture of Lissa and me dressed up like fairies for Halloween. A bag of SweeTarts. It was as though my mother were meeting me for the first time.

Abruptly, she turned and extended her hand toward me. “Here.”

Startled, I leaned forward and held my palm out underneath hers. Something small and cool dropped into my hand. It was a round pendant, a small one—not much bigger than a dime in diameter. A base of silver held a flat disc of colored glass circles. Frowning, I ran my thumb over its surface. It was strange, but the circles almost made it look like an eye. The inner one was small, just like a pupil. It was so dark blue that it looked black. Surrounding it was a larger circle of pale blue, which was in turn surrounded by a circle of white. A very, very thin ring of that dark blue color circled the outside.

“Thanks,” I said. I hadn’t expected anything from her. The gift was weird—why the hell would she give me an eye?—but it *was* a gift. “I . . . I didn’t get you anything.”

My mom nodded, face blank and unconcerned once more. “It’s fine. I don’t need anything.”

She turned away again and started walking around the room. She didn’t have a lot of space to do it, but her shorter height gave her a smaller stride. Each time she passed in front of the window over my bed, the light would catch her auburn hair and light it up. I watched her curiously and realized she was as nervous as me.

She halted in her pacing and glanced back toward me. “How’s your eye?”

“Getting better.”

“Good.” She opened her mouth, and I had a feeling she was on the verge of apologizing. But she didn’t.

When she started pacing again, I decided I couldn’t stand the inactivity. I began putting my presents away. I’d gotten a pretty nice haul of stuff this morning. One

of them was a silk dress from Tasha, red and embroidered with flowers. My mother watched me hang it in the room's tiny closet.

"That was very nice of Tasha."

"Yeah," I agreed. "I didn't know she was going to get me anything. I really like her."

"Me too."

I turned from the closet in surprise and stared at my mom. Her astonishment mirrored mine. If I hadn't known any better, I'd have said we'd just agreed on something. Maybe Christmas miracles did happen.

"Guardian Belikov will be a good match for her."

"I—" I blinked, not entirely sure what she was talking about. "Dimitri?"

"Guardian Belikov," she corrected sternly, still not approving of my casual way of addressing him.

"What . . . what kind of match?" I asked.

She raised an eyebrow. "You haven't heard? She's asked him to be her guardian—since she doesn't have one."

I felt like I'd been punched again. "But he's . . . assigned here. And to Lissa."

"Arrangements can be made. And regardless of the Ozera reputation . . . she's still royal. If she pushes, she can get her way."

I stared bleakly into space. "Well, I guess they *are* friends and everything."

"More than that—or possibly could be."

Bam! Punched again.

"*What*?"

"Hmm? Oh. She's . . . *interested* in him." By my mother's tone, it was clear that romantic matters actually held no interest for her. "She's willing to have dhampir children, so it's possible they might eventually make an, um, arrangement if he were her guardian."

Oh. My. God.

Time froze.

My heart stopped beating.

I realized my mother was waiting for a response. She was leaning against my desk, watching me. She might be able to hunt down Strigoi, but she was oblivious to my feelings.

"Is . . . is he going to do it? Be her guardian?" I asked weakly.

My mom shrugged. "I don't think he's agreed to it yet, but of course he will. It's a great opportunity."

"Of course," I echoed. Why would Dimitri turn down the chance to be a guardian to a friend of his *and* to have a baby?

I think my mom said something else after that, but I didn't hear it. I didn't hear anything. I kept thinking about Dimitri leaving the Academy, leaving *me*. I thought about the way he and Tasha had gotten along with each other so well. And then, after those recollections, my imagination started improvising future scenarios. Tasha and Dimitri together. Touching. Kissing. Naked. Other things . . .

I squeezed my eyes shut for half a second and then opened them.

"I'm really tired."

My mom stopped mid-sentence. I had no idea what she'd been saying before I interrupted her.

"I'm really tired," I repeated. I could hear the hollowness in my own voice.

Empty. No emotion. “Thanks for the eye . . . um, thing, but if you don’t mind . . .”

My mother stared at me in surprise, her features open and confused. Then, just like that, her usual wall of cool professionalism slammed back into place. Until that moment, I hadn’t realized how much she’d let it up. But she had. For just a brief time, she’d made herself vulnerable with me. That vulnerability was now gone.

“Of course,” she said stiffly. “I don’t want to bother you.”

I wanted to tell her it wasn’t that. I wanted to tell her I wasn’t kicking her out for any personal reason. And I wanted to tell her that I wished she were the kind of loving, understanding mother you always hear about, one I could confide in. Maybe even a mother I could discuss my troubled love life with.

God. I wished I could tell *anyone* about that, actually. Especially right now.

But I was too caught up in my own personal drama to say a word. I felt like someone had ripped my heart out and tossed it across the other side of the room. There was a burning, agonizing pain in my chest, and I had no idea how it could ever be filled. It was one thing to accept that I couldn’t have Dimitri. It was something entirely different to realize someone else *could*.

I didn’t say anything else to her because my speech capabilities no longer existed. Fury glinted in her eyes, and her lips flattened out into that tight expression of displeasure she so often wore. Without another word, she turned around and left, slamming the door behind her. That door slam was something I would have done too, actually. I guess we really did share some genes.

But I forgot about her almost immediately. I just kept sitting there and thinking. Thinking and imagining.

I spent the rest of the day doing little more than that. I skipped dinner. I shed a few tears. But mostly, I just sat on my bed thinking and growing more and more depressed. I also discovered that the only thing worse than imagining Dimitri and Tasha together was remembering when he and *I* had been together. He would never touch me again like that, never kiss me again. . . .

This was the worst Christmas ever.

TEN

THE SKI TRIP COULDN'T HAVE come at a more inopportune moment. It was impossible to get the Dimitri and Tasha thing out of my head, but at least packing and getting ready made sure I didn't devote 100 percent of my brain power to him. More like 95 percent.

I had other things to distract me, too. The Academy might—rightfully—be overprotective when it came to us, but sometimes that translated into pretty cool stuff. Example: The Academy had access to a couple of private jets. This meant no Strigoi could attack us at an airport, *and* it also meant we got to travel in style. Each jet was smaller than a commercial plane, but the seats were cushy and had lots of leg room. They extended far enough back that you could practically lie down to sleep. On long flights, we had little consoles in the seats that gave us TV movie options. Sometimes they'd even break out fancy meals. I was betting this flight, however, would be too short for any movies or substantial food.

We left late on the twenty-sixth. When I boarded the jet, I looked around for Lissa, wanting to talk to her. We hadn't really spoken after the Christmas brunch. I wasn't surprised to see her sitting with Christian, and they didn't look like they wanted to be interrupted. I couldn't hear their conversation, but he'd put his arm around her and had that relaxed, flirty expression that only she could bring out. I remained fully convinced that he could never do as good a job as me of taking care of her, but he clearly made her happy. I put on a smile and nodded at them as I passed down the aisle toward where Mason was waving at me. As I did, I also walked by Dimitri and Tasha sitting together. I pointedly ignored them.

"Hey," I said sliding into the seat beside Mason.

He smiled at me. "Hey. You ready for the ski challenge?"

"As ready as I'll ever be."

"Don't worry," he said. "I'll go easy on you."

I scoffed and leaned my head back against the seat. "You're so delusional."

"Sane guys are boring."

To my surprise, he slid his hand over mine. His skin was warm, and I felt my own skin tingle where he touched me. It startled me. I'd convinced myself Dimitri was the only one I'd ever respond to again.

It's time to move on, I thought. *Dimitri obviously has. You should have done it a long time ago*.

I laced my fingers with Mason's, catching him off guard. "I do. This is going to be fun."

And it was.

I tried to keep reminding myself that we were here because of a tragedy, that there were Strigoi and humans out there who might strike again. No one else seemed to remember that, though, and I admit, I was having a difficult time myself.

The resort was gorgeous. It was built to sort of look like a log cabin, but no pioneer cabin could have held hundreds of people or had such luxury accommodations. Three stories of gleaming, golden-colored wood sat among lofty pine trees. The windows were tall and gracefully arched, tinted for Moroi convenience. Crystal lanterns—electric, but shaped to look like torches—hung around all the entrances, giving the entire building a glittering, almost bejeweled look.

Mountains—which my enhanced eyes could just barely make out in the night—surrounded us, and I bet the view would have been breathtaking when it was light out. One side of the grounds led off to the skiing area, complete with steep hills and moguls, as well as lifts and tow ropes. Another side of the lodge had an ice rink, which delighted me since I'd missed out that one day by the cabin. Near that, smooth hills were reserved for sledding.

And that was just the outside.

Inside, all sorts of arrangements had been made to cater to Moroi needs. Feeders stayed on hand, ready to serve twenty-four hours a day. The slopes ran on a nocturnal schedule. Wards and guardians circled the entire place. Everything a living vampire could want.

The main lobby had a cathedral ceiling and an enormous chandelier hanging over it. Its floor was intricately tiled marble, and the front desk stayed open around the clock, ready to indulge our every need. The rest of the lodge, hallways and lounges, had a red, black, and gold color scheme. The deep shade of red dominated over the other hues, and I wondered if its resemblance to blood was a coincidence. Mirrors and art adorned the walls, and little ornamental tables had been placed here and there. They held vases of pale green, purple-spotted orchids that filled the air with a spicy scent.

The room I shared with Lissa was bigger than our dorm rooms put together and had the same rich colors as the rest of the lodge. The carpet was so plush and deep that I immediately shed my shoes at the door and walked in barefoot, luxuriating in the way my feet sank into that softness. We had king-size beds, covered in feather duvets and set with so many pillows that I swore a person could get lost in them all and never be seen again. French doors opened on to a spacious balcony, which, considering we were on the top floor, would have been cool if not for the fact it was freezing outside. I suspected the two-person hot tub on the far end would go a long way to make up for the cold.

Drowning in so much luxury, I reached an overload point where the rest of the accommodations started swimming together. The jetted marble bathtub. The plasma-screen TV. The basket of chocolate and other snacks. When we finally decided to go skiing, I had to practically drag myself from the room. I could probably have spent the rest of my vacation lounging in there and been perfectly content.

But we finally ventured outside, and once I managed to push Dimitri and my mother out of my head, I started to enjoy myself. It helped that the lodge was so

enormous; there was little chance of running into them.

For the first time in weeks, I was able to finally focus on Mason and realize just how much fun he was. I also got to hang out with Lissa more than I had in a while, which put me in an even better mood.

With Lissa, Christian, Mason, and me, we were able to get kind of a double-date thing going. The four of us spent almost all of the first day skiing, though the two Moroi had a bit of trouble keeping up. Considering what Mason and I went through in our classes, he and I weren't afraid to try daring stunts. Our competitive natures made us eager to go out of our way to outdo each other.

"You guys are suicidal," remarked Christian at one point. It was dark outside, and tall light posts illuminated his bemused face.

He and Lissa had been waiting at the bottom of the mogul hill, watching Mason and me come down. We'd been moving at insane speeds. The part of me that had been trying to learn control and wisdom from Dimitri knew it was dangerous, but the rest of me liked embracing that recklessness. That dark streak of rebelliousness still hadn't let me go.

Mason grinned as we skidded to a halt, sending up a spray of snow. "Nah, this is just a warm-up. I mean, Rose has been able to keep up with me the whole time. Kid stuff."

Lissa shook her head. "Aren't you guys taking this too far?"

Mason and I looked at each other. "No."

She shook her head. "Well, we're going inside. Try not to kill yourselves."

She and Christian left, arm and arm. I watched them go, then turned back to Mason. "I'm good for a while longer. You?"

"Absolutely."

We took a lift back up to the top of the hill. When we were just about to head down, Mason pointed.

"Okay, how about this? Hit those moguls there, then jump over that ridge, swing back with a hairpin turn, dodge those trees, and land there."

I followed his finger as he pointed out a jagged path down one of the biggest slopes. I frowned.

"That one really is insane, Mase."

"Ah," he said triumphantly. "She finally cracks."

I glowered. "She does not." After another survey of his crazy route, I conceded. "Okay. Let's do it."

He gestured. "You first."

I took a deep breath and leapt off. My skis slid smoothly over the snow, and piercing wind blasted into my face. I made the first jump neatly and precisely, but as the next part of the course sped forward, I realized just how dangerous it really was. In that split second, I had a decision to make. If I didn't do it, I'd never hear the end of it from Mason—and I *really* wanted to show him up. If I did manage it, I could feel pretty secure about my awesomeness. But if I tried and messed up . . . I could break my neck.

Somewhere in my head, a voice that sounded suspiciously like Dimitri's started talking about wise choices and learning when to show restraint.

I decided to ignore that voice and went for it.

This course was as hard as I'd feared, but I pulled it off flawlessly, one insane move after another. Snow flew up around me as I made each sharp, dangerous

turn. When I safely reached bottom, I looked up and saw Mason gesturing wildly. I couldn't make out his expression or words, but I could imagine his cheers. I waved back and waited for him to follow suit.

But he didn't. Because when Mason got halfway down, he wasn't able to pull off one of the jumps. His skis caught, and his legs twisted. Down he went.

I reached him at about the same time some of the resort staff did. To everyone's relief, Mason hadn't broken his neck or anything else. His ankle did appear to have a nasty sprain, however, which was probably going to limit his skiing for the rest of the trip.

One of the instructors monitoring the slopes ran forward, fury all over her face.

"What were you kids thinking?" she exclaimed. She turned on me. "I couldn't believe it when you did those stupid stunts!" Her glare fixed on Mason next. "And then *you* had to go ahead and copy her!"

I wanted to argue that it had all been his idea, but blame didn't matter at this point. I was just glad he was all right. But as we all went inside, guilt began to gnaw at me. I *had* acted irresponsibly. What if he'd been seriously injured? Horrible visions danced through my mind. Mason with a broken leg . . . a broken neck . . .

What had I been thinking? No one had made me do that course. Mason had suggested it . . . but I hadn't fought back. Goodness knew I probably could have. I might have had to endure some mockery, but Mason was crazy enough about me that feminine wiles probably would have stopped this madness. I'd gotten caught up in the excitement and the risk—much as I had in kissing Dimitri—not giving enough thought to the consequences because secretly, inside of me, that impulsive desire to be wild still lurked. Mason had it too, and his called to me.

That mental Dimitri voice chastised me once more.

After Mason was safely returned to the lodge and had ice on his ankle, I carried our equipment back outside toward the storage buildings. When I went back inside, I went through a different doorway than I normally used. This entrance was set behind a huge, open porch with an ornate wooden railing. The porch was built into the side of the mountain and had a breathtaking view of the other peaks and valleys around us— if you felt like standing around long enough in freezing temperatures to admire it. Which most people didn't.

I walked up the steps to the porch, stomping snow off my boots as I did. A thick scent, both spicy and sweet, hung in the air. Something about it felt familiar, but before I could identify it, a voice suddenly spoke to me out of the shadows.

"Hey, little dhampir."

Startled, I realized someone was indeed standing on the porch. A guy—a Moroi —leaned against the wall not far from the door. He brought a cigarette up to his mouth, took a long drag, and then dropped it to the floor. He stamped the butt out and crooked me a smile. That was the scent, I realized. Clove cigarettes.

Warily, I stopped and crossed my arms as I took him in. He was a little shorter than Dimitri but wasn't as lanky as some Moroi guys ended up looking. A long, charcoal coat—probably made out of some insanely expensive cashmere-wool blend—fit his body exceptionally well, and the leather dress shoes he wore indicated more money still. He had brown hair that looked like it had been purposely styled to appear a little unkempt, and his eyes were either blue or green—I didn't have quite enough light to know for sure. His face was cute, I

supposed, and I pegged him to be a couple years older than me. He looked like he'd just come from a dinner party.

"Yeah?" I asked.

His eyes swept over my body. I was used to attention from Moroi guys. It just usually wasn't so obvious. And I usually wasn't bundled up in winter clothing and sporting a black eye.

He shrugged. "Just saying hi, that's all."

I waited for more, but all he did was stuff his hands into the coat's pockets. With a shrug of my own, I took a couple steps forward.

"You smell good, you know," he suddenly said.

I stopped walking again and gave him a puzzled look, which only made his sly smile grow a little bigger.

"I . . . um, what?"

"You smell good," he repeated.

"Are you joking? I've been sweating all day. I'm disgusting. " I wanted to walk away, but there was something eerily compelling about this guy. Like a train wreck. I didn't find him attractive per se; I was just suddenly interested in talking to him.

"Sweat isn't a bad thing," he said, leaning his head against the wall and looking upward thoughtfully. "Some of the best things in life happen while sweating. Yeah, if you get too much of it and it gets old and stale, it turns pretty gross. But on a beautiful woman? Intoxicating. If you could smell things like a vampire does, you'd know what I'm talking about. Most people mess it all up and drown themselves in perfume. Perfume can be good . . . especially if you get one that goes with your chemistry. But you only need a hint. Mix about 20 percent of that with 80 percent of your own perspiration . . . mmm." He tilted his head to the side and looked at me. "Dead sexy."

I suddenly remembered Dimitri and his aftershave. Yeah. *That* had been dead sexy, but I certainly wasn't going to tell this guy about it.

"Well, thanks for the hygiene lesson," I said. "But I don't own any perfume, *and* I'm going to go shower all this hot sweaty action off me. Sorry."

He pulled out a pack of cigarettes and offered it to me. He moved only a step closer, but it was enough for me to smell something else on him. Alcohol. I shook my head at the cigarettes, and he tapped one out for himself.

"Bad habit," I said, watching him light it.

"One of many," he replied. He inhaled deeply. "You here with St. Vlad's?"

"Yup."

"So you're going to be a guardian when you grow up."

"Obviously."

He exhaled smoke, and I watched it drift away into the night. Heightened vampire senses or no, it was a wonder he could smell anything around those cloves.

"How long until you grow up?" he asked. "I might need a guardian."

"I graduate in the spring. But I'm already spoken for. Sorry."

Surprise flickered in his eyes. "Yeah? Who is he?"

"*She's* Vasilisa Dragomir."

"Ah." His face split into a huge grin. "I knew you were trouble as soon as I saw you. You're Janine Hathaway's daughter."

"I'm Rose Hathaway," I corrected, not wanting to be defined by my mother.

"Nice to meet you, Rose Hathaway." He extended a gloved hand to me that I hesitantly took. "Adrian Ivashkov."

"And you think *I'm* trouble," I muttered. The Ivashkovs were a royal family, one of the wealthiest and most powerful. They were the kind of people who thought they could get anything they wanted and walked over those in their way. No wonder he was so arrogant.

He laughed. He had a nice laugh, rich and almost melodious. It made me think of warm caramel, dripping from a spoon. "Handy, huh? Each of our reputations precedes us."

I shook my head. "You don't know anything about me. And I only know of your *family*. I don't know anything about you."

"Want to?" he asked tauntingly.

"Sorry. I'm not into older guys."

"I'm twenty-one. Not that much older."

"I have a boyfriend." It was a small lie. Mason certainly wasn't my boyfriend yet, but I hoped Adrian would leave me alone if he thought I was taken.

"Funny you didn't mention that right away," Adrian mused. "He didn't give you that black eye, did he?"

I felt myself blushing, even in the cold. I'd been hoping he wouldn't notice the eye, which was stupid. With his vampire eyes, he'd probably noticed as soon as I stepped onto the porch.

"He wouldn't be alive if he did. I got it during . . . practice. I mean, I'm training to be a guardian. Our classes are always rough."

"That's pretty hot," he said. He dropped this second cigarette to the ground and put it out with his foot.

"Punching me in the eye?"

"Well, no. Of course not. I meant that the idea of getting rough with you is hot. I'm a big fan of full-contact sports."

"I'm sure you are," I said dryly. He was arrogant and presumptuous, yet I still couldn't quite force myself to leave.

The sound of footsteps behind me made me turn. Mia came around the path and walked up the steps. When she saw us, she stopped suddenly.

"Hey, Mia."

She glanced between the two of us.

"*Another* guy?" she asked. From her tone, you would have thought I had my own harem of men.

Adrian gave me a questioning, amused look. I gritted my teeth and decided not to dignify that with a response. I opted for uncharacteristic politeness.

"Mia, this is Adrian Ivashkov."

Adrian turned on the same charm he'd used on me. He shook her hand. "Always a pleasure to meet a friend of Rose's, especially a pretty one." He spoke like he and I had known each other since childhood.

"We aren't friends," I said. So much for politeness.

"Rose only hangs out with guys and psychopaths," said Mia. Her voice carried the usual scorn she harbored for me, but there was a look on her face that showed Adrian had clearly caught her interest.

"Well," he said cheerfully, "since I'm both a psychopath and a guy, that would

explain why we're such good friends."

"You and I aren't friends either," I told him.

He laughed. "Always playing hard to get, huh?"

"She's not that hard to get," said Mia, clearly upset that Adrian was paying more attention to me. "Just ask half the guys at our school."

"Yeah," I retorted, "and you can ask the other half about Mia. If you can do a favor for her, she'll do *lots* of favors for you." When she'd declared war on Lissa and me, Mia had managed to get a couple of guys to tell everyone at school that I'd done some pretty awful things with them. The ironic thing was that she'd gotten them to lie for her by sleeping with them herself.

A flicker of embarrassment passed over her face, but she held her ground.

"Well," she said, "at least I don't do them for free."

Adrian made some cat noises.

"Are you done?" I asked. "It's past your bedtime, and the grown-ups would like to talk now." Mia's youthful looks were a sore point with her, one I frequently enjoyed exploiting.

"Sure," she said crisply. Her cheeks turned pink, intensifying her porcelain-doll appearance. "I have better things to do anyway." She turned toward the door, then paused with her hand resting on it. She glanced toward Adrian. "Her mom gave her that black eye, you know."

She went inside. The fancy glass doors swung shut behind her.

Adrian and I stood there in silence. Finally, he took out the cigarettes again and lit another. "Your mom?"

"Shut up."

"You're one of those people who either has soul mates or mortal enemies, aren't you? No in-between. You and Vasilisa are probably like sisters, huh?"

"I guess."

"How is she?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

He shrugged, and if I didn't know better, I'd have said he was overdoing casualness. "I don't know. I mean, I know you guys ran away . . . and there was that stuff with her family and Victor Dashkov. . . ."

I stiffened at the reference to Victor. "So?"

"Dunno. Just figured it might be a lot for her to, you know, handle."

I studied him carefully, wondering what he was getting at. There had been a brief leak about Lissa's fragile mental health, but it had been well-contained. Most people had forgotten about it or assumed it was a lie.

"I've got to go." I decided avoidance was the best tactic just now.

"Are you sure?" He sounded only mildly disappointed. Mostly he seemed as cocky and amused as before. Something about him still intrigued me, but whatever it was, it wasn't enough to combat everything else I was feeling, or to risk discussing Lissa. "I thought it was time for the grown-ups to talk. Lots of grown-up things I'd like to talk about."

"It's late, I'm tired, and your cigarettes are giving me a headache," I growled.

"I suppose that's fair." He drew in on the cigarette and let out the smoke. "Some women think they make me look sexy."

"I think you smoke them so you have something to do while thinking up your next witty line."

He choked on the smoke, caught between inhaling and laughing. “Rose Hathaway, I can’t wait to see you again. If you’re this charming while tired and annoyed *and* this gorgeous while bruised and in ski clothes, you must be devastating at your peak.”

“If by ‘devastating’ you mean that you should fear for your life, then yeah. You’re right.” I jerked open the door. “Good night, Adrian.”

“I’ll see you soon.”

“Not likely. I told you, I’m not into older guys.”

I walked into the lodge. As the door closed, I just barely heard him call behind me, “Sure, you aren’t.”

ELEVEN

LISSA WAS UP AND GONE before I even stirred the next morning, which meant I had the bathroom to myself while I got ready for the day. I loved that bathroom. It was enormous. My king-size bed would have fit comfortably inside it. A scalding shower with three different nozzles woke me up, though my muscles ached from yesterday. As I stood in front of the full-length mirror and combed my hair, I saw with some disappointment that the bruise was still there. It was significantly lighter, however, and had turned yellowish. Some concealer and powder almost entirely covered it up.

I headed downstairs in search of food. The dining room was just shutting down breakfast, but one of the waitresses gave me a couple of peach marzipan scones to go. Munching on one as I walked, I expanded my senses to get a feel for where Lissa was. After a couple of moments, I sensed her on the other side of the lodge, away from the student rooms. I followed the trail until I arrived at a room on the third floor. I knocked.

Christian opened the door. “Sleeping Beauty arrives. Welcome. ”

He ushered me inside. Lissa sat cross-legged on the room’s bed and smiled when she saw me. The room was as sumptuous as mine, but most of the furniture had been shoved aside to make space, and in that open area, Tasha stood.

“Good morning,” she said.

“Hey,” I said. So much for avoiding her.

Lissa patted a spot beside her. “You’ve got to see this.”

“What’s going on?” I sat down on the bed and finished the last of the scone.

“Bad things,” she said mischievously. “You’ll approve.”

Christian walked over to the empty space and faced Tasha. They regarded each other, forgetting about Lissa and me. I’d apparently interrupted something.

“So why can’t I just stick with the consuming spell?” asked Christian.

“Because it uses a lot of energy,” she told him. Even with jeans and a ponytail —*and* the scar—she managed to look ridiculously cute. “Plus, it’ll most likely kill your opponent.”

He scoffed. “Why wouldn’t I want to kill a Strigoi?”

“You might not always be fighting one. Or maybe you need information from them. Regardless, you should be prepared either way.”

They were practicing offensive magic, I realized. Excitement and interest replaced the sullenness I’d acquired upon seeing Tasha. Lissa hadn’t been kidding about them doing “bad things.” I’d always suspected they were practicing

offensive magic, but . . . wow. Thinking about it and actually seeing it were two very different things. Using magic as a weapon was forbidden. A punishable offense. A student experimenting with it might be forgiven and simply disciplined, but for an adult to actively be teaching a minor . . . yeah. That could get Tasha in *major* trouble. For half a second, I toyed with the idea of turning her in. Immediately, I dismissed the notion. I might hate her for making moves on Dimitri, but part of me sort of believed in what she and Christian were doing. Plus, it was just cool.

"A distracting spell is almost as useful," she continued.

Her blue eyes took on the intense focus I often saw Moroi get while using magic. Her wrist flicked forward, and a streak of fire snaked past Christian's face. It didn't touch him, but from the way he flinched, I suspected it had been close enough for him to feel the heat.

"Try it," she told him.

Christian hesitated for only a moment and then made the same hand motion she had. Fire streaked out, but it had none of the finely tuned control hers had had. He also didn't have her aim. It went straight for her face, but before it could touch her, it parted and split around her, almost like it had hit an invisible shield. She'd deflected it with her own magic.

"Not bad—aside from the fact you would have burned my face off."

Even I wouldn't want her face burned off. But her hair . . . ah, yes. We'd see how pretty she was without that raven-black mane.

She and Christian practiced a while longer. He improved as time went by, though he clearly had a ways to go before he had Tasha's skill. My interest grew and grew as they went on, and I found myself pondering all the possibilities this kind of magic could offer.

They wrapped up their lesson when Tasha said she had to go. Christian sighed, clearly frustrated that he hadn't been able to master the spell in an hour. His competitive nature was almost as strong as mine.

"I still think it'd be easier to just burn them entirely," he argued.

Tasha smiled as she brushed her hair into a tighter ponytail. Yeah. She could *definitely* do without that hair, particularly since I knew how much Dimitri liked long hair.

"Easier because it involves less focus. It's sloppy. Your magic'll be stronger in the long run if you can learn this. And, like I said, it has its uses."

I didn't want to agree with her, but I couldn't help it.

"It could be really useful if you were fighting with a guardian, " I said excitedly. "Especially if completely burning a Strigoi takes so much energy. This way, you use just a quick burst of your strength to distract the Strigoi. And it *will* distract one since they hate fire so much. Then that's all the time a guardian would need to stake them. You could take down a whole bunch of Strigoi that way."

Tasha grinned at me. Some Moroi—like Lissa and Adrian— smiled without showing their teeth. Tasha always showed hers, including the fangs.

"Exactly. You and I'll have to go Strigoi hunting someday," she teased.

"I don't think so," I replied.

The words in and of themselves weren't that bad, but the tone I used to deliver them certainly was. Cold. Unfriendly. Tasha looked momentarily surprised at my

abrupt change in attitude but shrugged it off. Shock from Lissa traveled to me through the bond.

Tasha didn't seem bothered, however. She chatted with us a bit longer and made plans to see Christian for dinner. Lissa gave me a sharp look as she, Christian, and I walked down the elaborate spiral staircase leading back down to the lobby.

"What was *that* about?" she asked.

"What was what about?" I asked innocently.

"Rose," she said meaningfully. It was hard to play dumb when your friend knew you could read her mind. I knew exactly what she was talking about. "You being a bitch to Tasha."

"I wasn't that much of a bitch."

"You were rude," she exclaimed, stepping out of the way of a bunch of Moroi children who came tearing through the lobby. They were bundled up in parkas, and a weary-looking Moroi ski instructor followed them.

I put my hands on my hips. "Look, I'm just grumpy, okay? Didn't get much sleep. Besides, I'm not like you. I don't have to be polite all the time."

As happened so often lately, I couldn't believe what I'd just said. Lissa stared at me, more astonished than hurt. Christian glowered, on the verge of snapping back at me, when Mason mercifully approached us. He hadn't needed a cast or anything, but he had a slight limp to his walk.

"Hey there, Hop-Along," I said, sliding my hand into his.

Christian put his anger for me on hold and turned to Mason. "Is it true your suicidal moves finally caught up with you?"

Mason's eyes were on me. "Is it true you were hanging out with Adrian Ivashkov?"

"I—what?"

"I heard you guys got drunk last night."

"You did?" asked Lissa, startled.

I looked between both their faces. "No, of course not! I barely know him."

"But you *do* know him," pushed Mason.

"Barely."

"He's got a bad reputation," warned Lissa.

"Yeah," said Christian. "He goes through a lot of girls."

I couldn't believe this. "Will you guys lay off? I talked to him for, like, five minutes! And that's only because he was blocking my way inside. Where are you getting all this?" Immediately, I answered my own question. "Mia."

Mason nodded and had the grace to look embarrassed.

"Since when do you talk to her?" I asked.

"I just ran into her, that's all," he told me.

"And you believed her? You know she lies half the time."

"Yeah, but there's usually some truth in the lies. And you *did* talk to him."

"Yes. *Talk*. That's it."

I really had been trying to give some serious thought about dating Mason, so I didn't appreciate him not believing me. He had actually helped me unravel Mia's lies earlier in the school year, so I was surprised he'd be so paranoid about them now. Maybe if his feelings really had grown for me, he was more susceptible to jealousy.

Surprisingly, it was Christian who came to the rescue and changed the subject. “I suppose there’s no skiing today, huh?” He pointed to Mason’s ankle, immediately triggering an indignant response.

“What, you think this is going to slow me down?” asked Mason.

His anger diminished, replaced by that burning need to prove himself—the need he and I both shared. Lissa and Christian looked at him like he was crazy, but I knew nothing we said would stop him.

“You guys want to come with us?” I asked Lissa and Christian.

Lissa shook her head. “We can’t. We have to go to this luncheon being hosted by the Contas.”

Christian groaned. “Well, *you* have to go.”

She elbowed him. “So do you. The invitation said I get to bring a guest. Besides, this is just a warm-up for the *big* one.”

“Which one is that?” asked Mason.

“Priscilla Voda’s huge dinner,” sighed Christian. Seeing him look so pained made me smile. “The queen’s best friend. All the snobbiest royals will be there, *and* I’ll have to wear a suit.”

Mason flashed me a grin. His earlier antagonism was gone. “Skiing’s sounding better and better, huh? Less of a dress code.”

We left the Moroi behind and went outside. Mason couldn’t compete with me in the same way he had yesterday; his movements were slow and awkward. Still, he did remarkably well when one considered everything. The injury wasn’t as bad as we’d feared, but he had the prudence to stick to extremely easy runs.

The full moon hung in the blankness, a glowing sphere of silvery white. The electric lights overpowered most of its illumination on the ground, but here and there, in the shadows, the moon just barely managed to cast its glow. I wished it were bright enough to reveal the surrounding mountain range, but those peaks stayed shrouded in darkness. I’d forgotten to look at them when it was light out earlier.

The runs were super simple for me, but I stayed with Mason and only occasionally teased him about how his remedial skiing was putting me to sleep. Boring runs or no, it was just nice to be outside with my friends, and the activity stirred my blood enough to warm me against the chill air. The light posts lit up the snow, turning it into a vast sea of white, the flakes’ crystals sparkling faintly. And if I managed to turn away and block the lights from my field of vision, I could look up and see the stars spilling over the sky. They stood out stark and crystalline in the clear, freezing air. We stayed out for most of the day again, but this time, I called it quits early, pretending to be tired so Mason could get a break. He might manage easy skiing with his tender ankle, but I could tell it was starting to hurt him.

Mason and I headed back toward the lodge walking very close to each other, laughing about something we’d seen earlier. Suddenly, I saw a streak of white in my peripheral vision, and a snowball smashed into Mason’s face. I immediately went on the defensive, jerking backward and peering around. Whoops and cries sounded from an area of the resort grounds that held storage sheds and was interspersed with looming pines.

“Too slow, Ashford,” someone called. “Doesn’t pay to be in love.”

More laughs. Mason’s best friend, Eddie Castile, and a few other novices from

school materialized from behind a cluster of trees. Beyond them, I heard more shouts.

"We'll still take you in, though, if you want to be on our team," said Eddie. "Even if you do dodge like a girl."

"Team?" I asked excitedly.

Back at the Academy, throwing snowballs was strictly prohibited. School officials were inexplicably afraid that we'd throw snowballs packed with glass shards or razor blades, though I had no clue how they thought we'd get a hold of that kind of stuff in the first place.

Not that a snowball fight was *that* rebellious, but after all the stress I'd been through recently, throwing objects at other people suddenly sounded like the best idea I'd heard in a while. Mason and I dashed off with the others, the prospect of forbidden fighting giving him new energy and causing him to forget the pain in his ankle. We set to the fight with a die-hard zeal.

The fight soon became a matter of nailing as many people as possible while dodging attacks from others. I was exceptional at both and furthered the immaturity by catcalling and shouting silly insults at my victims.

By the time someone noticed what we were doing and yelled at us, we were all laughing and covered with snow. Mason and I once again started back for the lodge, and our mood was so high, I knew the Adrian thing was long forgotten.

Indeed, Mason looked at me just before we went inside. "Sorry I, uh, jumped all over you about Adrian earlier."

I squeezed his hand. "It's okay. I know Mia can tell some pretty convincing stories."

"Yeah . . . but even if you were with him . . . it's not like I have any right . . ."

I stared at him, surprised to see his usual brash countenance turn shy. "Don't you?" I asked.

A smile turned up his lips. "Do I?"

Smiling back, I stepped forward and kissed him. His lips felt amazingly warm in the freezing air. It wasn't like the earth-shattering kiss I'd had with Dimitri before the trip, but it was sweet and nice—a friendly sort of kiss that *maybe* could turn into more. At least, that was how I saw it. From the look on Mason's face, it appeared his whole world had been rocked.

"Wow," he said, eyes wide. The moonlight made his eyes look silvery blue.

"You see?" I said. "Nothing to worry about. Not Adrian, not anybody."

We kissed again—a bit longer this time—before finally dragging ourselves apart. Mason was clearly in a better mood, as well as he should have been, and I dropped into bed with a smile on my face. I wasn't technically sure if Mason and I were a couple now, but we were very close to it.

But when I slept, I dreamed about Adrian Ivashkov.

I stood with him on the porch again, only it was summer. The air was balmy and warm, and the sun hung bright in the sky, coating everything in golden light. I hadn't been in this much sun since living among humans. All around, the mountains and valleys were green and alive. Birds sang everywhere.

Adrian leaned against the porch's railing, glanced over, and did a double-take when he saw me. "Oh. Didn't expect to see you here." He smiled. "I was right. You *are* devastating when you're cleaned up."

Instinctively, I touched the skin around my eye.

"It's gone," he said.

Even without being able to see it, I somehow knew he was right. "You aren't smoking."

"Bad habit," he said. He nodded toward me. "You scared? You're wearing a lot of protection."

I frowned, then looked down. I hadn't noticed my clothing. I wore a pair of embroidered jeans I'd seen once but had been unable to afford. My T-shirt was cropped, showing off my stomach, and I wore a belly-button ring. I'd always wanted to get my belly button pierced but had never been able to afford it. The charm I now wore here was a little silver dangly one, and hanging at the end of it was that weird blue eye pendant my mom had given me. Lissa's chotki was wound around my wrist.

I looked back up at Adrian, studying the way the sun shone off his brown hair. Here, in full daylight, I could see that his eyes were indeed green—a deep emerald as opposed to Lissa's pale jade. Something startling suddenly occurred to me.

"Doesn't all this sun bother you?"

He gave a lazy shrug. "Nah. It's my dream."

"No, it's *my* dream."

"Are you sure?" His smile returned.

I felt confused. "I . . . I don't know."

He chuckled, but a moment later, the laugher faded. For the first time since I'd met him, he looked serious. "Why do you have so much darkness around you?"

I frowned. "What?"

"You're surrounded in blackness." His eyes studied me shrewdly, but not in a checking-me-out sort of way. "I've never seen anyone like you. Shadows everywhere. I never would have guessed it. Even while you're standing here, the shadows keep growing."

I looked down at my hands but saw nothing out of the ordinary. I glanced back up. "I'm shadow-kissed. . . ."

"What's that mean?"

"I died once." I'd never talked to anyone other than Lissa and Victor Dashkov about that, but this was a dream. It didn't matter. "And I came back."

Wonder lit his face. "Ah, interesting . . ."

I woke up.

Someone was shaking me. It was Lissa. Her feelings hit me so hard through the bond that I briefly snapped into her mind and found myself looking at me. "Weird" didn't begin to cover it. I pulled back into myself, trying to sift through the terror and alarm coming from her.

"What's wrong?"

"There's been another Strigoi attack."

TWELVE

I WAS OUT OF BED IN a flash. We found the family lodge abuzz with the news. People clustered in small groups in the halls. Family members sought each other out. Some conversations were conducted in terrified whispers; some were loud and easy to overhear. I stopped a few people, trying to get the story straight. Everyone had a different version of what had happened, though, and some wouldn't even pause to talk. They hurried past, either seeking out loved ones or preparing to leave the resort, convinced there might be a safer place elsewhere.

Frustrated with the differing stories, I finally—reluctantly—knew I had to seek out one of the two sources who would give me solid information. My mother or Dimitri. It was like flipping a coin. I wasn't really thrilled with either one of them right now. I debated momentarily and finally decided on my mother, seeing as how she wasn't getting it on with Tasha Ozera.

The door to my mother's room was ajar, and as Lissa and I entered, I saw that a sort of makeshift headquarters had been established here. Lots of guardians were milling around, moving in and out, and discussing strategy. A few gave us odd looks, but no one stopped or questioned us. Lissa and I slid onto a small sofa to listen to a conversation my mother was having.

She stood with a group of guardians, one of whom was Dimitri. So much for avoiding him. His brown eyes glanced at me briefly, and I averted my gaze. I didn't want to deal with my troubled feelings for him right now.

Lissa and I soon discerned the details. Eight Moroi had been killed along with their five guardians. Three Moroi were missing, either dead or turned Strigoi. The attack hadn't really happened near here; it had been somewhere in northern California. Nonetheless, a tragedy like this couldn't help but reverberate within the Moroi world, and for some, two states away was far too close. People were terrified, and I soon learned what in particular made this attack so notable.

"There had to be more than last time," said my mother.

"More?" exclaimed one of the other guardians. "That last group was unheard of. I still can't believe nine Strigoi managed to work together—you expect me to believe they managed to get more organized still?"

"Yes," snapped my mother.

"Any evidence of humans?" someone else asked.

My mother hesitated, then: "Yes. More broken wards. And the way it was all conducted . . . it's identical to the Badica attack."

Her voice was hard, but there was a kind of weariness in it, too. It wasn't

physical exhaustion, though. It was mental, I realized. Strain and hurt over what they were talking about. I always thought of my mother as some sort of unfeeling killing machine, but this was clearly hard for her. It was a hard, ugly matter to discuss—but at the same time, she was tackling it without hesitation. It was her duty.

A lump formed in my throat that I quickly swallowed down. Humans. Identical to the Badica attack. Ever since that massacre, we'd extensively analyzed the oddity of such a large group of Strigoi teaming up and recruiting humans. We'd spoken in vague terms about "if something like this ever happens again . . ." But no one had seriously talked about *this* group—the Badica killers—doing it again. One time was a fluke—maybe a bunch of Strigoi had happened to gather and impulsively decided to go on a raid. It was horrible, but we could write that off.

But now . . . now it looked as though that group of Strigoi hadn't been a random occurrence. They'd united with purpose, utilized humans strategically, and had attacked again. We now had what could be a pattern: Strigoi actively seeking out large groups of prey. Serial killings. We could no longer trust the protective magic of the wards. We couldn't even trust sunlight. Humans could move around in the day, scouting and sabotaging. The light was no longer safe.

I remembered what I'd said to Dimitri at the Badica house: *This changes everything, doesn't it?*

My mother flipped through some papers on a clipboard. "They don't have forensic details yet, but the same number of Strigoi couldn't have done this. None of the Drozdovs or their staff escaped. With five guardians, seven Strigoi would have been preoccupied—at least temporarily—for some to escape. We're looking at nine or ten, maybe."

"Janine's right," said Dimitri. "And if you look at the venue . . . it's too big. Seven couldn't have covered it."

The Drozdovs were one of the twelve royal families. They were large and prosperous, not like Lissa's dying clan. They had plenty of family members to go around, but obviously, an attack like this was still horrible. Furthermore, something about them tickled my brain. There was something I should remember . . . something I should know about the Drozdovs.

While part of my mind puzzled that out, I watched my mother with fascination. I'd listened to her tell her stories. I'd seen and *felt* her fight. But really, truly, I'd never seen her in action in a real-life crisis. She showed every bit of that hard control she did around me, but here, I could see how necessary it was. A situation like this created panic. Even among the guardians, I could sense those who were so keyed up that they wanted to do something drastic. My mother was a voice of reason, a reminder that they had to stay focused and fully assess the situation. Her composure calmed everybody; her strong manner inspired them. This, I realized, was how a leader behaved.

Dimitri was just as collected as she was, but he deferred to her to run things. I had to remind myself sometimes that he was young as far as guardians went. They discussed the attack more, how the Drozdovs had been having a belated Christmas party in a banquet hall when they were attacked.

"First Badicas, now Drozdovs," muttered one guardian. "They're going after royals."

"They're going after Moroi," said Dimitri flatly. "Royal. Non-royal. It doesn't

matter."

Royal. Non-royal. I suddenly knew why the Drozdovs were important. My spontaneous instincts wanted me to jump up and ask a question right now, but I knew better. This was the real deal. This was no time for irrational behavior. I wanted to be as strong as my mother and Dimitri, so I waited for the discussion to end.

When the group started to break up, I leapt up off the sofa and pushed my way toward my mother.

"Rose," she said, surprised. Like in Stan's class, she hadn't noticed me in the room. "What are you doing here?"

It was such a stupid question, I didn't try to answer it. What did she think I was doing here? This was one of the biggest things to happen to the Moroi.

I pointed to her clipboard. "Who else was killed?"

Irritation wrinkled her forehead. "Drozdovs."

"But who else?"

"Rose, we don't have time—"

"They had staff, right? Dimitri said non-royals. Who were they?"

Again, I saw the weariness in her. She took these deaths hard. "I don't know all the names." Flipping through a few pages, she turned the clipboard toward me. "There."

I scanned the list. My heart sank.

"Okay," I told her. "Thanks."

Lissa and I left them to go about their business. I wished I could have helped, but the guardians ran smoothly and efficiently on their own; they had no need for novices underfoot.

"What was that about?" asked Lissa, once we were heading back to the main part of the lodge.

"The Drozdovs' staff," I said. "Mia's mom worked for them...."

Lissa gasped. "And?"

I sighed. "And her name was on the list."

"Oh God." Lissa stopped walking. She stared off into space, blinking back tears. "Oh God," she repeated.

I moved in front of her and placed my hands on her shoulders. She was shaking.

"It's okay," I said. Her fear came to me in waves, but it was a numbed fear. Shock. "This is going to be okay."

"You heard them," she said. "There's a band of Strigoi organizing and attacking us! How many? Are they coming here?"

"No," I said firmly. I had no evidence of that, of course. "We're safe here."

"Poor Mia . . ."

There was nothing I could say to that. I thought Mia was an absolute bitch, but I wouldn't wish this on anyone, not even my worst enemy—which, technically, she was. Immediately, I corrected that thought. Mia wasn't my worst enemy.

I couldn't bear to leave Lissa's side for the rest of the day. I knew there were no Strigoi lurking in the lodge, but my protective instincts ran too strong. Guardians protected their Moroi. Like usual, I also worried about her being anxious and upset, so I did my best to diffuse those feelings.

The other guardians provided reassurance for Moroi too. They didn't walk side

by side with the Moroi, but they reinforced lodge security and stayed in constant communication with guardians at the scene of the attack. Information flowed in all day about the grisly specifics, as well as speculation about where the band of Strigoi was. Little of this was shared with novices, of course.

While the guardians did what they did best, the Moroi also did what they—unfortunately—did best: *talk*.

With so many royals and other important Moroi at the lodge, a meeting was organized that night to discuss what had happened and what might be done in the future. Nothing official would be decided here; the Moroi had a queen and a governing council elsewhere for those types of decisions. Everyone knew, though, that opinions gathered here would make their way up the chain of command. Our future safety could very well depend on what was discussed in this meeting.

It was held in an enormous banquet hall inside the lodge, one with a podium and plenty of seating. Despite the businesslike atmosphere, you could tell this room had been designed for things other than meetings about massacres and defense. The carpet had the texture of velvet and showed an ornate floral design in shades of silver and black. The chairs were made of black polished wood and had high backs, clearly intended for fancy dining. Paintings of long-dead Moroi royalty hung on the walls. I stared briefly at one of a queen whose name I didn't know. She wore an old-fashioned dress—too heavy on lace for my tastes—and had pale hair like Lissa's.

Some guy I didn't know was in charge of moderating and stood at the podium. Most of the royals on hand gathered at the front of the room. Everyone else, including students, took seats wherever they could. Christian and Mason had found Lissa and me by that point, and we all started to sit in the back when Lissa suddenly shook her head.

"I'm going to sit in the front."

The three of us stared at her. I was too dumbfounded to probe her mind.

"Look." She pointed. "The royals are sitting up there, sitting by family."

It was true. Members of the same clans had clustered near each other: Badicas, Ivashkovs, Zekloses, etc. Tasha sat there as well, but she was by herself. Christian was the only other Ozera there.

"I need to be up there," said Lissa.

"No one expects you to be there," I told her.

"I have to represent the Dragomirs."

Christian scoffed. "It's all a bunch of royal bullshit."

Her face set into a determined expression. "I need to be up there."

I opened myself up to Lissa's feelings and liked what I found. She'd spent most of the day quiet and afraid, much as she had when we'd found out about Mia's mom. That fear was within her still, but it was overpowered by a steady confidence and determination. She recognized that she was one of the ruling Moroi, and as much as the idea of roving bands of Strigoi scared her, she wanted to do her part.

"You should do it," I said softly. I also liked the idea of her defying Christian.

Lissa met my eyes and smiled. She knew what I had sensed. A moment later, she turned to Christian. "You should join your aunt."

Christian opened his mouth to protest. If not for the horribleness of the situation, seeing Lissa order him around would have been funny. He was always

stubborn and difficult; those who tried to push him didn't succeed. Watching his face, I saw the same realization I'd had about Lissa come over him. He liked seeing her strong too. He pressed his lips together in a grimace.

"Okay." He caught her hand, and the two of them walked off toward the front.

Mason and I sat down. Just before things started, Dimitri sat down on the other side of me, hair tied behind his neck and the leather coat draping around him as he settled in the chair. I glanced at him in surprise but said nothing. There were few guardians at this gathering; most were too busy doing damage control. It would figure. There I was, stuck between both of my men.

The meeting kicked off shortly thereafter. Everyone was eager to talk about how they thought the Moroi should be saved, but really, two theories got the most attention.

"The answer's all around us," said one royal, once he'd been given leave to speak. He stood by his chair and looked around the room. "*Here*. In places like this lodge. And St. Vladimir's. We send our children to safe places, places where they have safety in numbers and can be easily guarded. And look how many of us made it here, children and adults alike. Why don't we live this way all the time?"

"Plenty of us already do," someone shouted back.

The man waved that off. "A couple of families here and there. Or a town with a large Moroi population. But those Moroi are still decentralized. Most don't pool their resources—their guardians, their magic. If we could emulate this model . . ." He spread his hands out. ". . . we'd never have to worry about Strigoi again."

"And Moroi could never interact with the rest of the world again," I muttered. "Well, until humans discovered secret vampire cities sprouting up in the wilderness. Then we'd have *lots* of interactions."

The other theory about how to protect the Moroi involved fewer logistical problems but had greater personal impact— particularly for me.

"The problem is simply that we don't have enough guardians. " This plan's advocate was some woman from the Szelsky clan. "And so, the answer is simple: *get more*. The Drozdovs had five guardians, and that wasn't enough. Only six to protect over a dozen Moroi! That's unacceptable. It's no wonder these kinds of things keep happening."

"Where do you propose getting more guardians from?" asked the man who'd been in favor of Moroi banding together. "They're kind of a limited resource."

She pointed to where I and a few other novices sat. "We've got plenty already. I've watched them train. They're deadly. Why are we waiting until they turn eighteen? If we accelerated the training program and focused more on combat training than bookwork, we could turn out new guardians when they're sixteen."

Dimitri made a sound low in his throat that didn't seem happy. Leaning forward, he placed his elbows on his knees and rested his chin in his hands, eyes narrowed in thought.

"Not only that, we have plenty of potential guardians going to waste. Where are all the dhampir women? Our races are intertwined. The Moroi are doing their part to help the dhampirs survive. Why aren't these women doing theirs? Why aren't they here?"

A long, sultry laugh came as an answer. All eyes turned toward Tasha Ozera. Whereas many of the other royals had dressed up, she was easy and casual. She wore her usual jeans, a white tank top that showed a bit of midriff, and a blue,

lacy knit cardigan that came to her knees.

Glancing at the moderator, she asked, “May I?”

He nodded. The Szelsky woman sat down; Tasha stood up. Unlike the other speakers, she strode right up to the podium, so she could be clearly seen by everyone. Her glossy black hair was pulled back into a ponytail, completely exposing her scars in a way I suspected was intentional. Her face was bold and defiant. Beautiful.

“Those women aren’t here, Monica, because they’re too busy raising their children—you know, the ones you want to start sending out to the fronts as soon as they can walk. And please don’t insult us all by acting like the Moroi do a huge favor to the dhampirs by helping them reproduce. Maybe it’s different in your family, but for the rest of us, sex is fun. The Moroi doing it with dhampirs aren’t really making that big of a sacrifice.”

Dimitri had straightened up now, his expression no longer angry. Probably he was excited that his new girlfriend had mentioned sex. Irritation shot through me, and I hoped that if I had a homicidal look on my face, people would assume it was for Strigoi and not the woman currently addressing us.

Beyond Dimitri, I suddenly noticed Mia sitting by herself, farther down the row. I hadn’t realized she was here. She was slumped in her seat. Her eyes were red-rimmed, her face paler than usual. A funny ache burned in my chest, one I’d never expected her to bring about.

“And the reason we’re waiting for these guardians to turn eighteen is so that we can allow them to enjoy some pretense of a life before forcing them to spend the rest of their days in constant danger. They need those extra years to develop mentally as well as physically. Pull them out before they’re ready, treat them like they’re parts on an assembly line—and you’re just creating Strigoi fodder.”

A few people gasped at Tasha’s callous choice of words, but she succeeded in getting everyone’s attention.

“You create more fodder still if you try making the other dhampir women become guardians. You can’t force them into that life if they don’t want it. This entire plan of yours to get more guardians relies on throwing children and the unwilling into harm’s way, just so you can—barely—stay one step ahead of the enemy. I would have said it’s the stupidest plan I’ve ever heard, if I hadn’t already had to listen to his.”

She pointed at the first speaker, the one who had wanted Moroi compounds. Embarrassment clouded his features.

“Enlighten us then, Natasha,” he said. “Tell us what *you* think we should do, seeing as you have so much experience with Strigoi.”

A thin smile played on Tasha’s lips, but she didn’t rise to the insult. “What do I think?” She strode closer to the stage’s front, gazing at us as she answered his question. “I think we should stop coming up with plans that involve us relying on someone or something to protect us. You think there are too few guardians? That’s not the problem. The problem is there are too many Strigoi. And we’ve let them multiply and become more powerful because we do nothing about them except have stupid arguments like this. We run and hide behind the dhampirs and let the Strigoi go unchecked. It’s our fault. *We* are the reason those Drozdovs died. You want an army? Well, here we are. Dhampirs aren’t the only ones who can learn to fight. The question, Monica, isn’t where the dhampir women are in this

fight. The question is: *Where are we*?"

Tasha was shouting by now, and the exertion turned her cheeks pink. Her eyes shone with her impassioned feelings, and when combined with the rest of her pretty features—and even with the scar—she made a striking figure. Most people couldn't take their eyes off her. Lissa watched Tasha with wonder, inspired by her words. Mason looked hypnotized. Dimitri looked impressed. And farther past him . . .

Farther past him was Mia. Mia no longer hunched in her chair. She was sitting up straight, straight as a stick, her eyes as wide as they could go. She stared at Tasha as though she alone held all the answers to life.

Monica Szelsky looked less awed, and she fixed her gaze on Tasha. "Surely you aren't suggesting the Moroi fight alongside the guardians when the Strigoi come?"

Tasha regarded her levelly. "No. I'm suggesting the Moroi and the guardians go fight the Strigoi *before* they come."

A guy in his twenties who looked like a Ralph Lauren spokesmodel shot up. I would have wagered money he was royal. No one else could have afforded blond highlights that perfect. He untied an expensive sweater from around his waist and draped it over the back of his chair. "Oh," he said in a mocking voice, speaking out of turn. "So, you're going to just give us clubs and stakes and send us off to do battle?"

Tasha shrugged. "If that's what it takes, Andrew, then sure." A sly smile crossed her pretty lips. "But there are other weapons we can learn to use, too. Ones the guardians can't."

The look on his face showed how insane he thought that idea was. He rolled his eyes. "Oh yeah? Like what?"

Her smile turned into a full-fledged grin. "Like this."

She waved her hand, and the sweater he'd placed on the back of his chair burst into flames.

He yelped in surprise and knocked it to the floor, stamping it out with his feet.

There was a brief, collective intake of breath throughout the room. And then . . . chaos broke out.

THIRTEEN

PEOPLE STOOD UP AND SHOUTED, everyone wanting their opinion to be heard. As it was, most of them held the same view: Tasha was wrong. They told her she was crazy. They told her that in sending out Moroi and dhampirs to fight the Strigoi, she'd be expediting the extinction of both races. They even had the nerve to suggest that that was Tasha's plan all along—that she was somehow collaborating with the Strigoi in all of this.

Dimitri stood up, disgust all over his features as he surveyed the chaos. "You might as well leave. Nothing useful's going to happen now."

Mason and I rose, but he shook his head when I started to follow Dimitri out.

"You go on," said Mason. "I want to check something out."

I glanced at the standing, arguing people. I shrugged. "Good luck."

I couldn't believe it had only been a few days since I'd spoken to Dimitri. Stepping out into the hall with him, I felt like it'd been years. Being with Mason these last couple of days had been fantastic, but seeing Dimitri again, all of my old feelings for him came rushing back. Suddenly, Mason seemed like a child. My distress over the Tasha situation also came back, and stupid words fell out of my mouth before I could stop them.

"Shouldn't you be in there protecting Tasha?" I asked. "Before the mob gets her? She's going to get in big trouble for using magic like that."

He raised an eyebrow. "She can take care of herself."

"Yeah, yeah, because she's a badass karate magic user. I get all that. I just figured since you're going to be her guardian and all . . ."

"Where did you hear that?"

"I have my sources." Somehow, saying I'd heard it from my mom sounded less cool. "You've decided to, right? I mean, it sounds like a good deal, seeing as she's going to give you fringe benefits. . . ."

He gave me a level look. "What happens between her and me is none of your business," he replied crisply.

The words *between her and me* stung. It sounded like he and Tasha were a done deal. And, as often happened when I was hurt, my temper and attitude took over.

"Well, I'm sure you guys'll be happy together. She's just your type, too—I know how much you like women who aren't your own age. I mean, she's what, six years older than you? Seven? And I'm seven years younger than you."

"Yes," he said after several moments of silence. "You are. And every second this conversation goes on, you only prove how young you really are."

Whoa. My jaw almost hit the floor. Not even my mother punching me had hurt as badly as that. For a heartbeat, I thought I saw regret in his eyes, like he too realized just how harsh his words had been. But the moment passed, and his expression was hard once more.

"Little dhampir," a voice suddenly said nearby.

Slowly, still stunned, I turned toward Adrian Ivashkov. He grinned at me and gave a brief nod of acknowledgment to Dimitri. I suspected my face was bright red. How much had Adrian heard?

He held up his hands in a casual gesture. "I don't want to interrupt or anything. Just wanted to talk to you when you have time."

I wanted to tell Adrian I didn't have time to play whatever game he was into now, but Dimitri's words still smarted. He was looking at Adrian now in a very disapproving way. I suspected he, like everyone else, had heard about Adrian's bad reputation. *Good*, I thought. I suddenly wanted him to be jealous. I wanted to hurt him as much as he'd hurt me lately.

Swallowing my pain, I unearthed my man-eating smile, one I hadn't used to full effect in sometime. I walked over to Adrian and put a hand on his arm.

"I've got time now." I gave a nod of my own to Dimitri and steered Adrian away, walking close to him. "See you later, Guardian Belikov."

Dimitri's dark eyes followed us stonily. Then I turned away and didn't look back.

"Not into older guys, huh?" asked Adrian once we were alone.

"You're imagining things," I said. "Clearly, my stunning beauty has clouded your mind."

He laughed that nice laugh of his. "That's entirely possible."

I started to step back, but he tossed an arm around me. "No, no, you wanted to play chummy with me—now you've got to see it through."

I rolled my eyes at him and let the arm stay. I could smell alcohol on him as well as the perpetual smell of cloves. I wondered if he was drunk now. I had the feeling that there was probably little difference between his attitudes drunk or sober.

"What do you want?" I asked.

He studied me for a moment. "I want you to grab Vasilisa and come with me. We're going to have some fun. You'll probably want a swimsuit too." He seemed disappointed by the admission of this. "Unless you want to go naked."

"What? A bunch of Moroi and dhampirs just got slaughtered, and you want to go swimming and 'have fun'?"

"It's not just swimming," he said patiently. "Besides, that slaughter is exactly why you should go do this."

Before I could argue that, I saw my friends round the corner: Lissa, Mason, and Christian. Eddie Castile was with the group, which shouldn't have surprised me, but Mia was as well—which certainly did surprise me. They were deep in conversation, though they all stopped talking when they saw me.

"There you are," said Lissa, a puzzled look on her face.

I remembered Adrian's arm was still around me. I stepped out of it. "Hey, guys," I said. A moment of awkwardness hung around us, and I was pretty sure I heard a low chuckle from Adrian. I beamed at him and then my friends. "Adrian invited us to go swimming."

They stared at me in surprise, and I could almost see the wheels of speculation turning in their heads. Mason's face darkened a little, but like the others, he said nothing. I stifled a groan.

Adrian took me inviting the others to his secret interlude pretty well. With his easygoing attitude, I hadn't really expected anything else. Once we had swimsuits, we followed his directions to a doorway in one of the far wings of the lodge. It held a staircase that led down—and down and down. I nearly got dizzy as we wound around and around. Electric lights hung in the walls, but as we went farther, the painted walls changed to carved stone.

When we reached our destination, we discovered Adrian had been right—it wasn't just swimming. We were in a special spa area of the resort, one used only for the most elite Moroi. In this case, it was reserved for a bunch of royals I assumed were Adrian's friends. There were about thirty others, all his age or older, who bore the marks of wealth and elitism.

The spa consisted of a series of hot mineral pools. Maybe once they'd been in a cave or something, but the lodge builders had long since gotten rid of any sort of rustic surroundings. The black stone walls and ceiling were as polished and beautiful as anything else in the resort. It was like being in a cave—a really nice, designer cave. Racks of towels lined the walls, as did tables full of exotic food. The baths matched the rest of the room's hewn-out décor: stone-lined pools containing hot water that was heated from some underground source. Steam filled the room, and a faint, metallic smell hung in the air. Sounds of partygoers laughing and splashing echoed around us.

"Why is Mia with you?" I asked Lissa softly. We were winding our way through the room, looking for a pool that wasn't occupied.

"She was talking to Mason when we were getting ready to leave," she returned. She kept her voice just as quiet. "It seemed mean to just . . . I don't know . . . leave her . . ."

Even I agreed with that. Obvious signs of grief were written all over her face, but Mia seemed at least momentarily distracted by whatever Mason was telling her.

"I thought you didn't know Adrian," Lissa added. Disapproval hung in her voice and in the bond. We finally found a large pool, a little out of the way. A guy and a girl were on the opposite side, all over each other, but there was plenty of room for the rest of us. They were easy to ignore.

I put a foot into the water and pulled it back immediately.

"I don't," I told her. Cautiously, I inched the foot back in, slowly followed by the rest of my body. When I got to my stomach, I grimaced. I had on a maroon bikini, and the scalding water caught my stomach by surprise.

"You must know him a little. He invited you to a party."

"Yeah, but do you see him with us now?"

She followed my gaze. Adrian stood on the far side of the room with a group of girls in bikinis much smaller than mine. One was a Betsey Johnson suit I'd seen in a magazine and coveted. I sighed and looked away.

We'd all slipped into the water by then. It was so hot I felt like I was in a soup kettle. Now that Lissa seemed convinced of my innocence with Adrian, I tuned into the others' discussion.

"What are you talking about?" I interrupted. It was easier than listening and

figuring it out myself.

"The meeting," said Mason excitedly. Apparently, he'd gotten over seeing me and Adrian together.

Christian had settled onto a small shelf in the pool. Lissa curled up beside him. Putting a proprietary arm around her, he tipped his back so it rested on the edge.

"Your boyfriend wants to lead an army against the Strigoi, " he told me. I could tell he was saying it to provoke me.

I looked at Mason questioningly. It wasn't worth the effort to challenge the "boyfriend" comment.

"Hey, it was *your* aunt who suggested it," Mason reminded Christian.

"She only said we should find the Strigoi before they find us again," countered Christian. "She wasn't pushing for novices fighting. That was Monica Szelsky."

A waitress came by then with a tray of pink drinks. These were in elegant, long-stemmed crystal glasses with sugared rims. I had a strong suspicion the drinks were alcoholic, but I doubted anyone who made it into this party was going to get carded. I had no idea what they were. Most of my experiences with alcohol had involved cheap beer. I took a glass and turned back to Mason.

"You think that's a good idea?" I asked him. I sipped the drink, cautiously. As a guardian in training, I felt like I should always be on alert, but tonight I once again felt like being rebellious. The drink tasted like punch. Grapefruit juice. Something sweet, like strawberries. I was still pretty sure there was alcohol in it, but it didn't appear strong enough for me to lose sleep over.

Another waitress soon appeared with a tray of food. I eyed it and recognized almost nothing. There was something that looked vaguely like mushrooms stuffed with cheese, as well as something else that looked little round patties of meat or sausage. As a good carnivore, I reached for one, thinking it couldn't be that bad.

"It's foie gras," said Christian. There was a smile on his face I didn't like.

I eyed him warily. "What's that?"

"You don't know?" His tone was cocky, and for once in his life, he sounded like a true royal touting his elite knowledge over us underlings. He shrugged. "Take a chance. Find out."

Lissa sighed in exasperation. "It's goose liver."

I jerked my hand back. The waitress moved on, and Christian laughed. I glared at him.

Meanwhile, Mason was still hung up on my question about whether novices going to battle before graduation was a good idea.

"What else are we doing?" he asked indignantly. "What are *you* doing? You run laps with Belikov every morning. What's that doing for you? For the Moroi?"

What was that doing for me? Making my heart race and my mind have indecent thoughts.

"We aren't ready," I said instead.

"We've only got six more months," piped in Eddie.

Mason nodded his agreement. "Yeah. How much more can we learn?"

"Plenty," I said, thinking of how much I'd picked up from my tutoring sessions with Dimitri. I finished my drink. "Besides, where does it stop? Let's say they end school six months early, then send us off. What next? They decide to push back further and cut our senior year? Our junior year?"

He shrugged. "I'm not afraid to fight. I could have taken on Strigoi when I was

a sophomore."

"Yeah," I said dryly. "Just like you did skiing on that slope."

Mason's face, already flushed from the heat, turned redder still. I immediately regretted my words, particularly when Christian started laughing.

"Never thought I'd live to see the day when I agreed with you, Rose. But sadly, I do." The cocktail waitress came by again, and both Christian and I took new drinks. "The Moroi have got to start helping us defend *themselves*."

"With magic?" asked Mia suddenly.

It was the first time she'd spoken since we'd got here. Silence met her. I think Mason and Eddie didn't respond because they knew nothing about fighting with magic. Lissa, Christian, and I did—and were trying very hard to act like we didn't. There was a funny sort of hope in Mia's eyes, though, and I could only imagine what she'd gone through today. She'd woken up to learn her mother was dead and then been subjected to hours and hours of political bantering and battle strategies. The fact that she was sitting here at all seeming semi-composed was a miracle. I assumed people who actually liked their mothers would barely be able to function in that situation.

When no one else looked like they were going to answer her, I finally said, "I suppose. But . . . I don't know much about that."

I finished the rest of my drink and averted my eyes, hoping someone else would take up the conversation. They didn't. Mia looked disappointed but said no more when Mason switched back to the Strigoi debate.

I took a third drink and sank into the water as far as I reasonably could and still hold the glass. This drink was different. It looked chocolatey and had whipped cream on top. I took a taste and definitely detected the bite of alcohol. Still, I figured the chocolate probably diluted it.

When I was ready for a fourth drink, the waitress was nowhere in sight. Mason seemed really, really cute to me all of a sudden. I would have liked a little romantic attention from him, but he was still going on about Strigoi and the logistics of leading a strike in the middle of the day. Mia and Eddie were nodding along with him eagerly, and I got the feeling that if he decided to hunt Strigoi right now, they'd follow. Christian was actually joining the talk, but it was more to play devil's advocate. Typical. He thought a sort of preemptive strike would require guardians *and* Moroi, much as Tasha had said. Mason, Mia, and Eddie argued that if the Moroi weren't up to it, the guardians should take matters into their own hands.

I confess, their enthusiasm was kind of contagious. I rather liked the idea of getting the drop on Strigoi. But in the Badica and Drozdov attacks, all of the guardians had been killed. Admittedly the Strigoi had organized into huge groups and had help, but all that told me was that our side needed to be extra careful.

His cuteness aside, I didn't want to listen to Mason talk about his battle skills anymore. I wanted another drink. I stood up and climbed over the edge of the pool. To my astonishment, the world started spinning. I'd had that happen before when I got out of baths or hot tubs too quickly, but when things didn't right themselves, I realized those drinks might have been stronger than I thought.

I also decided a fourth wasn't such a good idea, but I didn't want to get back in and let everyone know I was drunk. I headed off toward a side room I'd seen the waitress disappear into. I hoped maybe there was a secret stash of desserts

somewhere, chocolate mousse instead of goose liver. As I walked, I paid special attention to the slippery floor, thinking that falling into one of the pools and cracking my skull would definitely cost me coolness points.

I was paying so much attention to my feet and trying not to stagger that I walked into someone. To my credit, it'd been his fault; he'd backed into me.

"Hey, watch it," I said, steadying myself.

But he wasn't paying attention to me. His eyes were on another guy, a guy with a bloody nose.

I'd walked right into the middle of a fight.

FOURTEEN

TWO GUYS I'D NEVER MET before were squaring off against each other. They looked to be in their twenties, and neither noticed me. The one who'd bumped into me shoved the other one hard, forcing him to stagger back considerably.

"You're afraid!" yelled the guy by me. He had on green swimming trunks, and his black hair was slicked back with water. "You're all afraid. You just want to hole up in your mansions and let the guardians do your dirty work. What are you going to do when they're all dead? Who'll protect you then?"

The other guy wiped the blood off his face with the back of his hand. I suddenly recognized him—thanks to his blond highlights. He was the royal who'd yelled at Tasha about wanting to lead Moroi to battle. She'd called him Andrew. He tried to land a hit and failed; his technique was all wrong. "This is the safest way. Listen to that Strigoi-lover, and we'll *all* be dead. She's trying to kill our whole race off!"

"She's trying to save us!"

"She's trying to get us to use black magic!"

The "Strigoi-lover" had to be Tasha. The non-royal guy was the first person outside of my little circle whom I'd ever heard speak in her favor. I wondered how many others out there shared his view. He punched Andrew again, and my base instincts—or maybe the punch—made me leap into action.

I sprang forward and wedged myself between them. I was still dizzy and a bit unsteady. If they hadn't been standing so close, I probably would have fallen over. They both hesitated, clearly caught off guard.

"Get out of here," snapped Andrew.

Being male and Moroi, they had greater height and weight than I, but I was probably stronger than either one alone. Hoping I could make the most of that, I grabbed each of them by the arm, pulled them toward me, and then shoved them away as hard as I could. They staggered, not having expected my strength. I staggered a little too.

The non-royal glared and took a step toward me. I was counting on the fact that he'd be old-fashioned and not hit a girl. "What are you doing?" he exclaimed. Several people had gathered and were watching excitedly.

I returned his glare. "I'm trying to stop you guys from being any more idiotic than you already are! You want to help? Stop fighting each other! Ripping each other's heads off isn't going to save the Moroi unless you're trying to thin stupidity out of the gene pool." I pointed at Andrew. "Tasha Ozera is *not* trying to

kill everyone off. She's trying to get you to stop being a victim." I turned to the other guy. "And as for you, you've got a long ways to go if you think this is the way to get your point across. Magic—especially offensive magic—takes a lot of self-control, and so far, you aren't impressing me with yours. *I* have more than you do, and if you knew me at all, you'd know how crazy that is."

The two guys stared at me, stunned. I was apparently more effective than a taser. Well, at least for several seconds I was. Because once the shock of my words wore off, they went at each other again. I got caught in the crossfire and shoved away, nearly falling in the process. Suddenly, from behind me, Mason came to my defense. He punched the first guy he could—the non-royal.

The guy flew backward, falling into one of the pools with a splash. I yelped, remembering my earlier fear about skull-cracking, but a moment later, he found his feet and rubbed water out of his eyes.

I grabbed Mason's arm, trying to hold him back, but he shrugged me off and went after Andrew. He shoved Andrew hard, pushing him into several Moroi—Andrew's friends, I suspected—who seemed to be trying to break up the fight. The guy in the pool climbed out, fury written all over his face, and made moves toward Andrew. This time, both Mason and I blocked his way. He glared at all of us.

"Don't," I warned him.

The guy clenched his fists and looked as though he might try to take us on. But we were intimidating, and he didn't appear to have an entourage of friends here like Andrew— who was shouting obscenities and being led away—did. With a few muttered threats, the non-royal backed off.

As soon as he was gone, I turned on Mason. "Are you out of your mind?"

"Huh?" he asked.

"Jumping into the middle of that!"

"You jumped in too," he said.

I started to argue, then realized he was right. "It's different, " I grumbled.

He leaned forward. "Are you drunk?"

"*No*. Of course not. I'm just trying to keep you from doing something stupid. Just because you have delusions of being able to kill a Strigoi doesn't mean you have to take it out on everyone else."

"Delusions?" he asked stiffly.

I started to feel kind of nauseous just then. My head spinning, I continued toward the side room, hoping I didn't stumble.

But when I reached it, I saw that it wasn't some kind of dessert or drink room after all. Well, at least not in the way I'd been thinking. It was a feeder room. Several humans reclined on satin-covered chaise lounges with Moroi by their sides. Jasmine incense burned in the air. Stunned, I watched with an eerie fascination as a blond Moroi guy leaned forward and bit into the neck of a very pretty redhead. All of these feeders were exceptionally good-looking, I realized just then. Like actresses or models. Only the best for royalty.

The guy drank long and deep, and the girl closed her eyes and parted her lips, an expression of pure bliss on her face as Moroi endorphins flooded into her bloodstream. I shivered, taken back to when I too had experienced that same kind of euphoria. In my alcohol-hazed mind, the whole thing suddenly seemed startlingly erotic. In fact, I almost felt intrusive—like I was watching people have

sex. When the Moroi finished and licked the last of the blood away, he brushed his lips against her cheek in a soft kiss.

"Want to volunteer?"

Light fingertips brushed my neck, and I jumped. I turned around and saw Adrian's green eyes and knowing smirk.

"Don't do that," I told him, knocking his hand away.

"Then what are you doing in here?" he asked.

I gestured around me. "I'm lost."

He peered at me. "Are you drunk?"

"*No*. Of course not . . . but . . ." The nausea had settled a little, but I still didn't feel right. "I think I should sit down."

He took my arm. "Well, don't do it in here. Someone might get the wrong idea. Let's go somewhere quiet."

He steered me off into a different room, and I looked around with interest. It was a massage area. Several Moroi lay back on tables and were getting back and foot massages from hotel staff. The oil they used smelled like rosemary and lavender. Under any other circumstances, a massage would have sounded great, but lying on my stomach seemed like the worst idea just now.

I sat down on the carpeted floor, leaning back against the wall. Adrian walked away and returned with a glass of water. Sitting down as well, he handed it to me.

"Drink this. It'll help."

"I told you, I'm not drunk," I mumbled. But I downed the water anyway.

"Uh-huh." He smiled at me. "You did nice work with that fight. Who was the other guy that helped you?"

"My boyfriend," I said. "Sort of."

"Mia was right. You do have a lot of guys in your life."

"It's not like that."

"Okay." He was still smiling. "Where's Vasilisa? I figured she'd be attached to you."

"She's with *her* boyfriend." I studied him.

"What's with the tone? Jealous? You want him for yourself? "

"God, no. I just don't like him."

"Does he treat her badly?" he asked.

"No," I admitted. "He adores her. He's just kind of a jerk."

Adrian was clearly enjoying this. "Ah, you *are* jealous. Does she spend more time with him than you?"

I ignored that. "Why do you keep asking about her? Are you interested in her?"

He laughed. "Rest easy, I'm not interested in her in the same way I am you."

"But you are interested."

"I just want to talk to her."

He left to fetch me more water. "Feeling better?" he asked, handing the glass to me. It was crystal and intricately carved. It seemed too fancy for plain water.

"Yeah . . . I didn't think those drinks were that strong."

"That's the beauty of them," he chuckled. "And speaking of beauty . . . that's a great color on you."

I shifted. I might not have been showing as much skin as those other girls, but I was showing more than I really wanted to with Adrian. Or was I? There was

something weird about him. His arrogant manner annoyed me . . . but I still liked being around him. Maybe the smartass in me recognized a kindred spirit.

Somewhere in the back of my drunken mind, a light clicked on. But I couldn't quite get to it. I drank more water.

"You haven't had a cigarette in, like, ten minutes," I pointed out, wanting to change the subject.

He made a face. "No smoking in here."

"I'm sure you've made up for it in punch."

His smile returned. "Well, *some* of us can hold our liquor. You aren't going to be sick, are you?"

I still felt tipsy but no longer nauseous. "No."

"Good."

I thought back to when I'd dreamed about him. It *had* been just a dream, but it had stuck with me, particularly the talk about me being surrounded in darkness. I wanted to ask him about it . . . even though I knew it was stupid. It had been my dream, not his.

"Adrian ..."

He turned his green eyes on me. "Yes, darling?"

I couldn't bring myself to ask. "Never mind."

He started to retort, then tilted his head toward the door. "Ah, here she comes."

"Who—"

Lissa stepped into the room, eyes scanning around. When she spotted us, I saw relief break over her. I couldn't feel it, though. Intoxicants like alcohol numbed the bond. It was another reason I shouldn't have taken such a stupid chance tonight.

"There you are," she said, kneeling beside me. Glancing at Adrian, she gave him a nod. "Hey."

"Hey yourself, cousin," he returned, using the family terms royals sometimes used around each other.

"You okay?" Lissa asked me. "When I saw how drunk you were, I thought you might have fallen in somewhere and drowned."

"I'm not—" I gave up trying to deny it. "I'm fine."

Adrian's usual expression had turned serious as he studied Lissa. It again reminded me of the dream. "How'd you find her?"

Lissa gave him a puzzled look. "I, um, checked all the rooms."

"Oh." He looked disappointed. "I thought you might have used your bond."

Both she and I stared.

"How do you know about that?" I demanded. Only a few people at school knew about it. Adrian had spoken about it as casually as he might have my hair color.

"Hey, I can't reveal all my secrets, can I?" he asked mysteriously. "And besides, there's a certain way you two act around each other . . . it's hard to explain. It's pretty cool . . . all the old myths are true."

Lissa regarded him warily. "The bond only works one way. Rose can sense what I'm feeling and thinking, but I can't do it back to her."

"Ah." We sat in silence a few moments, and I drank more water. Adrian spoke again. "What'd you specialize in anyway, cousin?"

She looked embarrassed. We both knew it was important to keep her spirit powers secret from others who might abuse her healing, but her cover story of not

having specialized always bothered her.

"I haven't," she said.

"Do they think you're going to? Late bloomer?"

"No."

"You're probably higher in the other elements, though, right? Just not strong enough to really master any?" He reached out to pat her shoulder in an exaggerated show of comfort.

"Yeah, how'd you—"

The instant his fingers touched her, she gasped. It was as though a bolt of lightning had struck her. The strangest look crossed her face. Even drunk, I felt the flood of joy that came pouring through the bond. She stared at Adrian in wonder. His eyes were locked onto hers too. I didn't understand why they were looking at each other like that, but it bothered me.

"Hey," I said. "Stop that. I told you, she has a boyfriend."

"I know," he said, still watching her. A small smile turned his lips. "We need to have a chat someday, cousin."

"Yes," she agreed.

"Hey." I was more confused than ever. "*You* have a boyfriend. And there he is."

She blinked back to reality. All three of us turned toward the doorway. Christian and the others stood there. I suddenly had a flashback to when they'd found me with Adrian's arm around me. This wasn't much better. Lissa and I were sitting on either side of him, very close.

She sprang up, looking mildly guilty. Christian was regarding her curiously.

"We're getting ready to leave," he said.

"Okay," she told him. She looked down at me. "Ready?"

I nodded and started to clamber to my feet. Adrian caught my arm as I did and helped me up. He smiled at Lissa. "Nice talking to you." To me, he murmured very quietly, "Don't worry. I told you, I'm not interested in her in that way. She doesn't look as good in a bathing suit. Probably not as good out of one either."

I pulled my arm away. "Well, you'll never find out."

"It's okay," he said. "I have a good imagination."

I joined the others, and we headed back toward the main part of the lodge. Mason gave me as strange a look as Christian had given Lissa and stayed away from me, walking toward the front with Eddie. To my surprise and discomfort, I found myself walking beside Mia. She looked miserable.

"I . . . I'm really sorry about what happened," I said finally.

"You don't have to act like you care, Rose."

"No, no. I mean it. It's horrible. . . . I'm so sorry." She wouldn't look at me. "Is . . . that is, are you going to see your dad soon?"

"Whenever they have the memorial," she said stiffly.

"Oh."

I didn't know what else to say and gave up, instead turning my attention to the stairs as we climbed back up to the lodge's main level. Unexpectedly, Mia was the one who continued the conversation.

"I watched you break up that fight . . ." she said slowly. "You mentioned offensive magic. Like you knew about it."

Oh. Great. She was going to make a play at blackmail . . . or was she? At the moment, she seemed almost civil.

"I was just guessing," I said. No way was I going to bust Tasha and Christian. "I don't really know that much. Just stories I've heard."

"Oh." Her face fell. "What kind of stories?"

"Um, well . . ." I tried to think of something neither too vague nor too specific. "Like I told those guys . . . the concentration thing is big. Because if you're in a battle with Strigoi, all sorts of things can distract you. So you've got to keep control."

That was actually a basic guardian rule, but it must have been new to Mia. Her eyes widened with eagerness. "What else? What kind of spells do people use?"

I shook my head. "I don't know. I don't really even know how spells work, and like I said, these are just . . . stories I've heard. My guess is you just find ways to use your element as a weapon. Like . . . fire users really have an advantage because fire'll kill Strigoi, so it's easy for them. And air users can suffocate people." I'd actually experienced that last one vicariously through Lissa. It had been horrible.

Mia's eyes grew wider still. "What about a water user?" she asked. "How could water hurt a Strigoi?"

I paused. "I, uh, never heard any stories about water users. Sorry."

"Do you have any ideas, though? Ways that, like, someone like me could learn to fight?"

Ah. So that's what this was about. It actually wasn't all that crazy. I remembered how excited she'd looked at the meeting when Tasha had talked about attacking Strigoi. Mia wanted to take revenge on the Strigoi for her mother's death. No wonder she and Mason had been getting along so well.

"Mia," I said gently, catching hold of the door to let her pass. We were almost at the lobby now. "I know how you must want to . . . do something. But I think you're better off just sort of letting yourself, um, grieve."

She reddened, and suddenly, I was seeing the normal and angry Mia. "Don't talk down to me," she said.

"Hey, I'm not. I'm serious. I'm just saying you shouldn't do anything rash while you're still upset. Besides . . ." I bit off my words.

She narrowed her eyes. "What?"

Screw it. She needed to know. "Well, I don't really know what good a water user would be against a Strigoi. It's probably the least useful element to use on one of them."

Outrage filled her features. "You're a real bitch, you know that?"

"I'm just telling you the truth."

"Well, let me tell *you* the truth. You're a total idiot when it comes to guys."

I thought about Dimitri. She wasn't entirely off base.

"Mason's great," she continued. "One of the nicest guys I know—and you don't even notice! He'd do anything for you, and you were off throwing yourself at Adrian Ivashkov."

Her words surprised me. Could Mia have a crush on Mason? And while I certainly hadn't been throwing myself at Adrian, I could see how it might have looked that way. And even if it weren't true, that wouldn't have stopped Mason from feeling hurt and betrayed.

"You're right," I said.

Mia stared at me, so astonished I'd agreed with her that she didn't say anything

else for the rest of the walk.

We reached the part of the lodge that split off into different wings for guys and girls. I grabbed a hold of Mason's arm as the others walked off.

"Hang on," I told him. I badly needed to reassure him about Adrian, but a tiny part of me wondered if I was doing it because I actually wanted Mason or because I just liked the idea of him wanting me and selfishly didn't want to lose that. He stopped and looked at me. His face was wary. "I wanted to tell you I'm sorry. I shouldn't have yelled at you after the fight—I know you were just trying to help. And with Adrian . . . nothing happened. I mean it."

"It didn't look that way," Mason said. But the anger on his face had faded.

"I know, but believe me, it's all him. He's got some kind of stupid crush on me."

My tone must have been convincing because Mason smiled. "Well. Hard not to."

"I'm not interested in him," I continued. "Or anyone else." It was a small lie, but I didn't think it mattered just then. I was going to be over Dimitri soon, and Mia had been right about Mason. He was wonderful and sweet and cute. I would be an idiot not to pursue this . . . right?

My hand was still on his arm, and I pulled him toward me. He didn't need much more of a signal. He leaned down and kissed me, and in the process, I found myself pressed up against the wall—very much like with Dimitri in the practice room. Of course, it felt nothing like how it had with Dimitri, but it was still nice in its way. I put my arms around Mason and started to pull him closer.

"We could go . . . somewhere," I said.

He pushed back and laughed. "Not when you're drunk."

"I'm not . . . that . . . drunk anymore," I said, trying to pull him back.

Giving me a small kiss on the lips, he stepped back. "Drunk enough. Look, this isn't easy, believe me. But if you still want me tomorrow—when you're sober—then we'll talk."

He leaned down and kissed me again. I tried to wrap my arms around him, but he broke away once more.

"Easy there, girl," he teased, backing toward his hallway.

I glared at him, but he only laughed and turned around. As he walked away, my glare faded, and I headed back to my room with a smile on my face.

FIFTEEN

I WAS TRYING TO PAINT MY toenails the next morning—not easy with such a god-awful hangover—when I heard a knock at the door. Lissa had been gone when I woke up, so I staggered across the room, trying not to ruin my wet nail polish. Opening up the door, I saw one of the hotel staff standing outside with a large box in both arms. He shifted it slightly so that he could peer around and look at me.

"I'm looking for Rose Hathaway."

"That's me."

I took the box from him. It was big but not all that heavy. With a quick thank-you, I shut the door, wondering if I should have tipped him. Oh well.

I sat on the floor with the box. It had no markings on it and was sealed with packing tape. I found a pen and stabbed at the tape. Once I'd hacked off enough, I opened the box and peered inside.

It was filled with perfume.

There had to be at least thirty little bottles of perfume packed into the box. Some I'd heard of, some I hadn't. They ranged from crazy expensive, movie-star caliber to cheap kinds I'd seen in drugstores. *Eternity*. *Angel*. *Vanilla Fields*. *Jade Blossom*. *Michael Kors*. *Poison*. *Hypnotic Poison*. *Pure Poison* . *Happy*. *Light Blue*. *Jōvan Musk*. *Pink Sugar*. *Vera Wang*. One by one, I picked up the boxes, read the descriptions, and then pulled out the bottles for a sniff.

I was about halfway through when reality hit. These had to be from Adrian.

I didn't know how he'd managed to get all of these delivered to the hotel in such a short amount of time, but money can make almost anything happen. Still, I didn't need the attention of a rich, spoiled Moroi; apparently he hadn't picked up on my signals. Regretfully, I started to place the perfumes back in the box—then stopped. Of course I'd return them . . . but there was no harm in sniffing the rest before I did.

Once more, I started pulling out bottle after bottle. Some I just sniffed the cap of; others I sprayed in the air. *Serendipity*. *Dolce & Gabbana*. *Shalimar*. *Daisy*. Note after note hit me: rose, violet, sandalwood, orange, vanilla, orchid . . .

By the time I was finished, my nose barely worked anymore. All of these had been designed for humans. They had a weaker sense of smell than vampires and even dhampirs, so these scents were extra strong. I had a new appreciation for what Adrian had meant about only a splash of perfume being necessary. If all these bottles were making me dizzy, I could only imagine what a Moroi would

smell. The sensory overload wasn't really helping the headache I'd woken up with either.

I packed up the perfume for real this time, stopping only when I came to a certain kind that I really liked. I hesitated, holding the little box in my hand. Then, I took the red bottle out and re-sniffed it. It was a crisp, sweet fragrance. There was some kind of fruit—but not a candied or sugary fruit. I racked my brain for a scent I'd once smelled on a girl I knew in my dorm. She'd told me the name. It was like a cherry . . . but sharper. Currant, that's what it was. And here it was in this perfume, mixed with some florals: lily of the valley and others I couldn't identify. Whatever the blend, something about it appealed to me. Sweet—but not *too* sweet. I read the box, looking for the name. *Amor Amor*.

"Fitting," I muttered, seeing how many love problems I seemed to have lately. But I kept the perfume anyway and repacked the rest.

Hoisting the box up in my arms, I took it down to the front desk and acquired some packing tape to reseal it. I also got directions to Adrian's room. Apparently, the Ivashkovs practically had their own wing. It wasn't too far from Tasha's room.

Feeling like a delivery girl, I walked down the hall and stopped in front of his door. Before I could manage to knock, it opened up, and Adrian stood before me. He looked as surprised as I felt.

"Little dhampir," he said cordially. "Didn't expect to see you here."

"I'm returning these." I hoisted the box toward him before he could protest. Clumsily, he caught it, staggering a bit in surprise. Once he had a good grip, he took a few steps back and set it on the floor.

"Didn't you like any of them?" he asked. "You want me to get you some more?"

"Don't send me any more gifts."

"It isn't a gift. It's a public service. What woman doesn't own perfume?"

"Don't do it again," I said firmly.

Suddenly, a voice behind him asked, "Rose? Is that you?"

I peered beyond him. Lissa.

"What are you doing here?"

Between my headache and what I had assumed was some interlude with Christian, I'd blocked her out as best I could this morning. Normally I would have known the instant I approached that she was inside the room. I opened myself up again, letting her shock run into me. She hadn't expected me to show up here.

"What are *you* doing here?" she asked.

"Ladies, ladies," he said teasingly. "No need to fight over me."

I glared. "We're not. I just want to know what's going on here."

A breath of aftershave hit me, and then I heard a voice behind me: "Me too."

I jumped. Spinning around, I saw Dimitri standing in the hallway. I had no clue what he was doing in the Ivashkov wing.

On his way to Tasha's room, a voice inside me suggested.

Dimitri no doubt always expected me to get into all sorts of trouble, but I think seeing Lissa there caught him off guard. He stepped past me and came into the room, looking between the three of us.

"Male and female students aren't supposed to be in each other's rooms."

I knew pointing out that Adrian wasn't technically a student wasn't going to get us out of trouble here. We weren't supposed to be in any guy's room.

"How do you keep doing this?" I asked Adrian, frustrated.

"Do what?"

"Keep making us look bad!"

He chuckled. "You guys are the ones who came here."

"You shouldn't have let them in," scolded Dimitri. "I'm sure you know the rules at St. Vladimir's."

Adrian shrugged. "Yeah, but I don't have to follow any school's stupid rules."

"Perhaps not," said Dimitri coldly. "But I would have thought you'd still respect those rules."

Adrian rolled his eyes. "I'm kind of surprised to find *you* lecturing about underage girls."

I saw the anger kindle in Dimitri's eyes, and for a moment, I thought I might have seen the loss of control I'd teased him about. But he stayed composed, and only his clenched fists showed how angry he was.

"Besides," continued Adrian, "nothing sordid was going on. We were just hanging out."

"If you want to 'hang out' with young girls, do it at one of the public areas."

I didn't really like Dimitri calling us 'young girls,' and I kind of felt like he was overreacting here. I also suspected part of his reaction had to do with the fact that *I* was here.

Adrian laughed just then, a weird kind of laugh that made my skin crawl. "Young girls? *Young* girls? Sure. Young and old at the same time. They've barely seen anything in life, yet they've already seen too much. One's marked with life, and one's marked with death . . . but *they're* the ones you're worried about? Worry about yourself, dhampir. Worry about you, and worry about me. We're the ones who are young."

The rest of us just sort of stared. I don't think anyone had expected Adrian to suddenly take an abrupt trip to Crazyville.

Adrian was calm and looked perfectly normal again. He turned away and strolled toward the window, glancing casually back at the rest of us as he pulled out his cigarettes.

"You ladies should probably go. He's right. I am a bad influence."

I exchanged looks with Lissa. Hurriedly, we both left and followed Dimitri down the hall toward the lobby.

"That was . . . strange," I said a couple of minutes later. It was stating the obvious, but, well, someone had to.

"Very," said Dimitri. He didn't sound angry so much as puzzled.

When we reached the lobby, I started to follow Lissa back toward our room, but Dimitri called to me.

"Rose," he said. "Can I talk to you?"

I felt a sympathetic rush of feeling from Lissa. I turned toward Dimitri and stepped off to the side of the room, out of the way of those passing through. A party of Moroi in diamonds and fur swept past us, anxious looks on their faces. Bellhops followed with luggage. People were still leaving in search of safer places. The Strigoi paranoia was far from over.

Dimitri's voice snapped my attention back to him. "That's Adrian Ivashkov." He said the name the same way everyone else did.

"Yeah, I know."

"This is the second time I've seen you with him."

"Yeah," I replied glibly. "We hang out sometimes."

Dimitri arched an eyebrow, then jerked his head back toward where we'd come from. "You hang out in his room a lot?"

Several retorts popped into my head, and then a golden one took precedence. "What happens between him and me is none of your business." I managed a tone very similar to the one he'd used on me when making a similar comment about him and Tasha.

"Actually, as long as you're at the Academy, what you do *is* my business."

"Not my personal life. You don't have any say in that."

"You're not an adult yet."

"I'm close enough. Besides, it's not like I'll magically become an adult on my eighteenth birthday."

"Clearly," he said.

I blushed. "That's not what I meant. I meant—"

"I know what you meant. And the technicalities don't matter right now. You're an Academy student. I'm your instructor. It's my job to help you and to keep you safe. Being in the bedroom of someone like *him* . . . well, that's not safe."

"I can handle Adrian Ivashkov," I muttered. "He's weird— really weird, apparently—but harmless."

I secretly wondered if Dimitri's problem might be that he was jealous. He hadn't pulled Lissa aside to yell at her. The thought made me slightly happy, but then I remembered my earlier curiosity about why Dimitri had even wandered by.

"Speaking of personal lives . . . I suppose you were off visiting Tasha, huh?"

I knew it was petty, and I expected a "none of your business" response. Instead he replied, "Actually, I was visiting your mother."

"You going to hook up with her too?" I knew of course that he wasn't, but the quip seemed too good to pass up.

He seemed to know that too and merely gave me a weary glance. "No, we were looking over some new data about the Strigoi in the Drozdov attack."

My anger and snarkiness dried up. The Drozdovs. The Badicas. Suddenly, everything that had happened this morning seemed incredibly trivial. How could I have stood there arguing with Dimitri about romances that might or might not be happening when he and the other guardians were trying to protect us?

"What'd you find out?" I asked quietly.

"We've managed to track some of the Strigoi," he said. "Or at least the humans with them. There were witnesses who lived nearby who spotted a few of the cars the group used. The plates were all from different states—the group appears to have split up, probably to make it harder for us. But one of the witnesses did catch one plate number. It's registered to an address in Spokane."

"Spokane?" I asked incredulously. "Spokane, *Washington*? Who makes Spokane their hideout?" I'd been there once. It was about as boring as every other backwoods northwest city.

"Strigoi, apparently," he said, deadpan. "The address was fake, but other evidence shows they really are there. There's a kind of shopping plaza that has some underground tunnels. There've been Strigoi sightings around that area."

"Then . . ." I frowned. "Are you going to go after them? Is somebody going to? I mean, this is what Tasha's been saying all along. . . . If we know where they are . . ."

He shook his head. “The guardians can’t do anything without permission from higher up. That’s not going to happen anytime soon.”

I sighed. “Because the Moroi talk too much.”

“They’re being cautious,” he said.

I felt myself getting worked up again. “Come *on*. Even you can’t want to be careful on this one. You actually know where Strigoi are hiding out. Strigoi who massacred children. Don’t you want to go after them when they don’t expect it?” I sounded like Mason now.

“It’s not that easy,” he said. “We answer to the Guardian Council and the Moroi government. We can’t just run off and act on impulse. And anyway, we don’t know everything yet. You should never walk into any situation without knowing all the details.”

“Zen life lessons again,” I sighed. I ran a hand through my hair, tucking it behind my ears. “Why’d you tell me this, anyway? This is guardian stuff. Not the kind of thing you let novices in on.”

He considered his words, and his expression softened. He always looked amazing, but I liked him best like this. “I’ve said a few things . . . the other day and today . . . that I shouldn’t have. Things that insulted your age. You’re seventeen . . . but you’re capable of handling and processing the same things those much older than you do.”

My chest grew light and fluttery. “Really?”

He nodded. “You’re still really young in a lot of ways— and act young—but the only way to really change that is to treat you like an adult. I need to do that more. I know you’ll take this information and understand how important it is and keep it to yourself.”

I didn’t love being told I acted young, but I liked the idea that he would talk to me like an equal.

“Dimka,” came a voice. Tasha Ozera walked up to us. She smiled when she saw me. “Hello, Rose.”

There went my mood. “Hey,” I said flatly.

She placed a hand on Dimitri’s forearm, sliding her fingers over the leather of his coat. I eyed those fingers angrily. How dare they touch him?

“You’ve got that look,” she told him.

“What look?” he asked. The stern look he’d worn with me vanished. There was a small, knowing smile on his lips. Almost a playful one.

“That look that says you’re going to be on duty all day.”

“Really? I have a look like that?” There was a teasing, mocking tone to his voice.

She nodded. “When does your shift technically end?”

Dimitri actually looked—I swear—sheepish. “An hour ago.”

“You can’t keep doing this,” she groaned. “You need a break.”

“Well . . . if you consider that I’m always Lissa’s guardian ...”

“For now,” she said knowingly. I felt sicker than I had last night. “There’s a big pool tournament going on upstairs.”

“I can’t,” he said, but the smile was still on his face. “Even though I haven’t played in a long time . . .”

What the—? Dimitri played *pool*?

Suddenly, it didn’t matter that we’d just had a discussion about him treating me

like an adult. Some small part of me did know what a compliment that was—but the rest of me wanted him to treat me like he did Tasha. Playful. Teasing. Casual. They were so familiar with each other, so completely at ease.

"Come on, then," she begged. "Just one round! We could take them all."

"I can't," he repeated. He sounded regretful. "Not with everything going on."

She sobered a little. "No. I suppose not." Glancing at me, she said teasingly, "I hope you realize what a hard-core role model you have here. He's never off duty."

"Well," I said, copying her lilting tone from earlier, "*for now*, at least."

Tasha looked puzzled. I don't think it occurred to her I'd be making fun of her. Dimitri's dark look told me he knew exactly what I was doing. I immediately realized I'd just killed whatever progress I'd made as an adult.

"We're finished here, Rose. Remember what I said."

"Yeah," I said, turning away. I suddenly wanted to go to my room and veg for a while. This day was making me tired already. "Definitely."

I hadn't gotten far when I ran into Mason. Good God. Men everywhere.

"You're mad," he said as soon as he looked at my face. He had a knack for discovering my moods. "What happened?"

"Some . . . authority problems. It's been a weird morning."

I sighed, unable to get Dimitri off the brain. Looking at Mason, I remembered how I'd been convinced I wanted to get serious with him last night. I was a head case. I couldn't make up my mind about anyone. Deciding the best way to banish one guy was to pay attention to another, I grabbed Mason's hand and steered him away.

"Come on. Wasn't the deal to go somewhere . . . um, private today?"

"I figured you weren't drunk anymore," he joked. But his eyes looked very, very serious. And interested. "I assumed it was all off."

"Hey, I stand by my claims, no matter what." Opening my mind, I searched for Lissa. She was no longer in our room. She'd gone off to some other royal event, no doubt still practicing for Priscilla Voda's big dinner. "Come on," I told Mason. "We'll go to my room."

Aside from when Dimitri inconveniently happened to be passing by someone's room, nobody was really enforcing the mixed-gender rule. It was practically like being back in my Academy dorms. As Mason and I went upstairs, I related to him what Dimitri had told me about the Strigoi in Spokane. Dimitri had told me to keep it to myself, but I was mad at him again, and I didn't see any harm in telling Mason. I knew he'd be interested in this.

I was right. Mason got really worked up.

"What?" he exclaimed as we walked into my room. "They're not *doing* anything?"

I shrugged and sat on my bed. "Dimitri said—"

"I know, I know . . . I heard you. About being careful and all that." Mason paced around my room angrily. "But if those Strigoi go after another Moroi . . . another family . . . damn it! They're going to wish they weren't so careful then."

"Forget about it," I said. I felt kind of miffed that me on a bed wasn't enough to deter him from crazy battle plans. "There's nothing we can do."

He stopped walking. "*We* could go."

"Go where?" I asked stupidly.

"To Spokane. There are buses you can catch in town."

“I . . . wait. You want us to go to Spokane and take on Strigoi?”

“Sure. Eddie’d do it too . . . we could go to that mall. They wouldn’t be organized or anything, so we could wait and pick them off one by one . . .”

I could only stare. “When did you get so dumb?”

“Oh, I see. Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“It’s not about confidence,” I argued, standing up and approaching him. “You kick major ass. I’ve seen it. But this . . . this isn’t the way. We can’t go get Eddie and take on Strigoi. We need more people. More planning. More information.”

I rested my hands on his chest. He placed his over them and smiled. The fire of battle was still in his eyes, but I could tell his mind was shifting to more immediate concerns. Like me.

“I didn’t mean to call you dumb,” I told him. “I’m sorry.”

“You’re just saying that now because you want to have your way with me.”

“Of course I am,” I laughed, happy to see him relax. The nature of this conversation reminded me a little of the one Christian and Lissa had had in the chapel.

“Well,” he said, “I don’t think I’m going to be too hard to take advantage of.”

“Good. Because there are *lots* of things I want to do.”

I slid my hands up and around his neck. His skin was warm beneath my fingers, and I remembered how much I’d enjoyed kissing him last night.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, he said, “You really are his student.”

“Whose?”

“Belikov’s. I was just thinking about when you mentioned needing more information and stuff. You act just like him. You’ve gotten all serious since you’ve been hanging out with him.”

“No, I haven’t.”

Mason had pulled me closer, but now I suddenly didn’t feel so romantic. I’d wanted to make out and *forget* Dimitri for a while, not have a conversation about him. Where had this come from? Mason was supposed to be distracting me.

He didn’t notice anything was wrong. “You’ve just changed, that’s all. It’s not bad . . . just different.”

Something about that made me angry, but before I could snap back, his mouth met mine in a kiss. Reasonable discussions sort of vanished. A bit of that dark temper started to rise in me, but I simply channeled that intensity into physicality as Mason and I fell on top of each other. I yanked him down on the bed, managing to do so without stopping the kissing. I was nothing if not a multitasker. I dug my nails into his back while his hands slid up the back of my neck and released the ponytail I’d just made minutes ago. Running his fingers through the unbound hair, he shifted his mouth down and kissed my neck.

“You are . . . amazing,” he told me. And I could tell that he meant it. His whole face glowed with affection for me.

I arched upward, letting his lips press harder against my skin while his hands slipped under the bottom of my shirt. They trailed upward along my stomach, just barely tracing the edge of my bra.

Considering we’d just been having an argument a minute ago, I was surprised to see things escalating so quickly. Honestly, though . . . I didn’t mind. This was the way I lived my life. Everything was always fast and intense with me. The night Dimitri and I had fallen victim to Victor Dashkov’s lust charm, there’d been

some pretty furious passion going on too. Dimitri had controlled it, though, so sometimes we'd taken things slowly . . . and that had been wonderful in its own way. But most of the time, we hadn't been able to hold ourselves back. I could feel it all over again. The ways his hands had run over my body. The deep, powerful kisses.

It was then that I realized something.

I was kissing Mason, but in my head, I was with Dimitri. And it wasn't like I was simply remembering either. I was actually imagining I was with Dimitri—right *now*—reliving that night all over again. With my eyes closed, it was easy to pretend.

But when I opened them and saw Mason's eyes, I knew he was with *me*. He adored me and had wanted me for a long time. For me to do this . . . to be with him and pretend I was with someone else . . .

It wasn't right.

I wiggled out of his reach. "No . . . don't."

Mason stopped immediately because that's the kind of guy he was.

"Too much?" he asked. I nodded. "That's okay. We don't have to do that."

He reached for me again, and I moved farther away. "No, I just don't . . . I don't know. Let's call it quits, okay?"

"I . . ." He was speechless for a moment. "What happened to the 'lots of things' you wanted to do?"

Yeah . . . it looked pretty bad, but what could I say? *I can't get physical with you because when I do, I just think about the other guy I actually want. You're just a stand-in.*

I swallowed, feeling stupid. "I'm sorry, Mase. I just can't."

He sat up and ran a hand over his hair. "Okay. All right."

I could hear the hardness in his voice. "You're mad."

He glanced over at me, a stormy expression on his face. "I'm just confused. I can't read your signals. One moment you're hot, the next you're cold. You tell me you want me, you tell me you don't. If you picked one, that'd be fine, but you keep making me think one thing and then you end up going in a completely different direction. Not just now—all the time."

It was true. I had gone back and forth with him. Sometimes I was flirty, other times I completely ignored him.

"Is there something you want me to do?" he asked when I didn't say anything. "Something that'll . . . I don't know. Make you feel better about me?"

"I don't know," I said weakly.

He sighed. "Then what do you want in general?"

Dimitri, I thought. Instead, I repeated myself. "I don't know."

With a groan, he stood up and headed for the door. "Rose, for someone who claims she wants to gather as much information as possible, you really have a lot to learn about yourself."

The door slammed behind him. The noise made me flinch, and as I stared at where Mason had just stood, I realized he was right. I did have a lot to learn.

SIXTEEN

LISSA FOUND ME LATER IN the day. I'd fallen asleep after Mason left, too dejected to leave the bed. Her slamming of the door jolted me awake.

I was happy to see her. I needed to spill about the fumbled thing with Mason, but before I could, I read her feelings. They were as troubled as mine. So, as always, I put her first.

"What happened?"

She sat on her bed, sinking into the feather duvet, her feelings both furious and sad. "Christian."

"Really?" I'd never known them to fight. They teased each other a lot, but it was hardly the kind of thing that could nearly bring her to tears.

"He found out . . . I was with Adrian this morning."

"Oh, wow," I said. "Yeah. That might be a problem." Standing up, I walked over to the dresser and found my brush. Wincing, I stood in front of the gilt-framed mirror and began brushing out the snarls acquired during my nap.

She groaned. "But nothing happened! Christian's freaking out over nothing. I can't believe he doesn't trust me."

"He trusts you. The whole thing's just weird, that's all." I thought about Dimitri and Tasha. "Jealousy makes people do and say stupid things."

"But nothing happened," she repeated. "I mean, you were there and—hey, I never found out. What *were* you doing there?"

"Adrian sent me a bunch of perfume."

"He—you mean that giant box you were carrying?"

I nodded.

"Whoa."

"Yeah. I came to return it," I said. "The question is, what were you doing there?"

"Just talking," she said. She started to light up, on the verge of telling me something, but then she paused. I felt the thought almost reach the front of her mind and then get shoved back. "I've got a lot to tell you, but first tell me what's up with you."

"Nothing's up with me."

"Whatever, Rose. I'm not psychic like you, but I know when you're pissed off about something. You've been kind of down since Christmas. What's up?"

Now wasn't the time to get into what had happened on Christmas when my mom told me about Tasha and Dimitri. But I did tell Lissa the story about Mason

—editing out why I had stopped—and simply driving home how I had.

"Well . . ." she said when I finished. "That was your right."

"I know. But I kind of led him on. I can see why he'd be upset."

"You guys can probably fix it, though. Go talk to him. He's crazy about you."

It was more than miscommunication. Things with Mason and me couldn't be patched up so easily. "I don't know," I told her. "Not everyone's like you and Christian."

Her face darkened. "Christian. I still can't believe he's being so stupid about this."

I didn't mean to, but I laughed. "Liss, you guys'll kiss and make up in like a day. More than kiss, probably."

It slipped out before I could stop it. Her eyes widened. "You know." She shook her head in exasperation. "Of *course* you know."

"Sorry," I said. I hadn't meant to let her know I knew about the sex thing, not until she told me herself.

She eyed me. "How much do you know?"

"Um, not much," I lied. I'd finished brushing my hair but began playing with the brush's handle in order to avoid her eyes.

"I have *got* to learn to keep you out of my mind," she muttered.

"Only way I can 'talk' to you lately." Another slipup.

"What's that supposed to mean?" she demanded.

"Nothing . . . I . . ." She was giving me a sharp look. "I . . . I don't know. I just feel like we don't talk as much anymore."

"Takes two to fix that," she said, voice kind again.

"You're right," I said, not pointing out that two could fix that only if one wasn't always with her boyfriend. True, I was guilty in my own way of locking things up—but I *had* wanted to talk to her a number of times lately. The timing just never seemed to be right—not even now. "You know, I never thought you'd be first. Or I guess I never thought I'd be a senior and still be a virgin."

"Yeah," she said dryly. "Me either."

"Hey! What's *that* supposed to mean?"

She grinned, then caught sight of her watch. Her smile fell. "Ugh. I've got to go to Priscilla's banquet. Christian was supposed to go with me, but he's off being an idiot. . . ." Her eyes focused hopefully on me.

"What? No. Please, Liss. You know how I hate those formal royal things."

"Oh, come on," she begged. "Christian flaked out. You can't throw me to the wolves. And didn't you just say we needed to talk more?" I groaned. "Besides, when you're my guardian, you'll have to do these things all the time."

"I know," I said darkly. "I thought I could maybe enjoy my last six months of freedom."

But in the end, she conned me into going with her, as we'd both known she would.

We didn't have much time, and I had to do a rush shower, blow-dry, and makeup job. I'd brought Tasha's dress on a whim, and while I still wanted her to suffer horribly for being attracted to Dimitri, I was grateful for her present now. I pulled on the silken material, happy to see the shade of red was just as killer on me as I'd imagined. It was a long, Asian-style dress with flowers embroidered into the silk. The high neck and long hem covered a lot of skin, but the material clung

to me and looked sexy in a different kind of way than showing a lot of skin did. My black eye was practically nonexistent by now.

Lissa, as always, looked amazing. She wore a deep purple dress by Johnna Raski, a well-known Moroi designer. It was sleeveless and made of satin. The tiny amethyst-like crystals set into the straps sparkled against her pale skin. She wore her hair up in a loose, artfully styled bun.

When we reached the banquet room, we drew a few eyes. I don't think the royals had expected the Dragomir princess to bring her dhampir friend to this highly anticipated, invitation-only dinner. But hey, Lissa's invite had said "and guest." She and I took our places at one of the tables with some royals whose names I promptly forgot. They were happy to ignore me, and I was happy to be ignored.

Besides, it wasn't like there weren't plenty of other distractions. This room was done all in silver and blue. Midnight blue silk cloths covered the tables, so shiny and smooth that I was terrified to eat on them. Sconces of beeswax candles hung all over the walls, and a fireplace decorated with stained glass crackled away in one corner. The effect was a spectacular panorama of color and light, dizzying to the eye. In the corner, a slim Moroi woman played soft cello music, her face dreamy as she focused on the song. The clinking of crystal wineglasses complemented the strings' low, sweet notes.

Dinner was equally amazing. The food was elaborate, but I recognized everything on my plate (china, of course) and liked all of it. No foie gras here. Salmon in a sauce of shiitake mushrooms. A salad with pears and goat cheese. Delicate almond-stuffed pastries for dessert. My only complaint was that the portions were small. The food seemed more like it was there to simply decorate the plates, and I swear, I finished it in ten bites. Moroi might still need food along with their blood, but they didn't need as much as a human—or, say, a growing dhamphir girl—needed.

Still, the food alone could have justified me coming along on this venture, I decided. Except, when the meal ended, Lissa told me we couldn't leave.

"We have to mingle," she whispered.

Mingle?

Lissa laughed at my discomfort. "You're the social one."

It was true. In most circumstances, I was the one who put myself out there and wasn't afraid to talk to people. Lissa tended to be shyer. Only, with this group, the tables were turned. This was her element, not mine, and it amazed me to see just how well she could interact with royal high society now. She was perfect, polished and polite. Everyone was eager to talk to her, and she always seemed to know the right thing to say. She wasn't using compulsion, exactly, but she definitely put out an air that drew others to her. I think it might have been an unconscious effect of spirit. Even with the meds, her magical and natural charisma came through. Whereas intense social interactions had once been forced and stressful for her, she now conducted them with ease. I was proud of her. Most of the conversation stayed pretty light: fashion, royal love lives, etc. No one seemed to want to spoil the atmosphere with ugly Strigoi talk.

So I clung to her side for the rest of the night. I tried to tell myself it was just practice for the future, when I'd follow her around like a quiet shadow anyway. The truth was, I just felt too uncomfortable with this group and knew my usual

snarky defense mechanisms really weren't useful here. Plus, I was painfully aware that I was the only dhampir dinner guest. There were other dhampirs, yes, but they were in formal guardian mode, hovering on the periphery of the room.

As Lissa worked the crowd, we drifted over to a small group of Moroi whose voices were growing louder. One of them I recognized. He was the guy from the fight that I'd helped break up, only this time he wore a striking black tuxedo instead of a swimsuit. He glanced up at our approach, blatantly checked us out, but apparently didn't remember me. Ignoring us, he continued on with his argument. Not surprisingly, Moroi protection was the topic. He was the one who'd been in favor of Moroi going on the offensive against the Strigoi.

"What part of 'suicide' don't you understand?" asked one of the men standing nearby. He had silvery hair and a bushy mustache. He wore a tux too, but the younger guy looked better in one. "Moroi training as soldiers will be the end of our race."

"It's not suicide," exclaimed the young guy. "It's the right thing to do. We have to start looking out for ourselves. Learning to fight and use our magic is our greatest asset, other than the guardians."

"Yes, but with the guardians, we don't need other assets," said Silver Hair. "You've been listening to non-royals. They don't have any guardians of their own, so of course they're scared. But that's no reason to drag *us* down and put *our* lives at risk."

"Then don't," said Lissa suddenly. Her voice was soft, but everyone in the little group stopped and looked at her. "When you talk about Moroi learning how to fight, you make it sound like an all-or-nothing matter. It's not. If you don't want to fight, then you shouldn't have to. I completely understand. " The man looked slightly mollified. "But, that's because you *can* rely on your guardians. A lot of Moroi can't. And if they want to learn self-defense, there's no reason why they shouldn't do it on their own."

The younger guy grinned triumphantly at his adversary. "There, you see?"

"It's not that easy," countered Silver Hair. "If it was just a matter of you crazy people wanting to get yourselves killed, then fine. Go do it. But where are you going to learn all these so-called fighting skills?"

"We'll figure the magic out on our own. Guardians will teach us actual physical fighting."

"Yes, see? I knew that was where this was going. Even if the rest of us don't take part in your suicide mission, you still want to strip us of our guardians to train up your pretend army."

The young guy scowled at the word *pretend*, and I wondered if more fists would fly. "You owe it to us."

"No, they don't," said Lissa.

Intrigued gazes turned her way again. This time, it was Silver Hair who regarded her triumphantly. The younger guy's features flushed with anger.

"Guardians are the best battle resources we have."

"They are," she agreed, "but that doesn't give you the right to take them away from their duty." Silver Hair practically glowed.

"Then how are we supposed to learn?" demanded the other guy.

"The same way guardians do," Lissa informed him. "If you want to learn to fight, go to the academies. Form classes and start at the beginning, the same way

the novices do. That way, you won't be taking guardians away from active protection. It's a safe environment, and the guardians there specialize in teaching students anyway." She paused thoughtfully. "You could even start making defense part of the standard curriculum for Moroi students already there."

Astonished stares fell on her, mine included. It was such an elegant solution, and everyone else around us realized it. It gave no party 100 percent of its demands, but it met most in a way that didn't really harm the other side. Pure genius. The other Moroi studied her with wonder and fascination.

Suddenly, everyone started talking at once, excited about the idea. They drew Lissa in, and soon there was a passionate conversation going on about her plan. I got shuffled to the edges and decided that was just fine. Then I retreated altogether and sought out a corner near a door.

Along the way, I passed a server with a tray of hors d'oeuvres. Still hungry, I eyed them suspiciously but saw nothing that looked like the foie gras from the other day. I gestured to one that looked like some sort of braised, rare meat.

"Is that goose liver?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Sweetbread."

That didn't sound bad. I reached for it.

"It's pancreas," said a voice behind me. I jerked back.

"What?" I squeaked. The waitress took my shock for rejection and moved on.

Adrian Ivashkov moved into my line of sight, looking immensely pleased with himself.

"Are you messing with me?" I asked. "'Sweetbread' is *pancreas* ?" I don't know why that shocked me so much. Moroi consumed blood. Why not internal organs? Still, I repressed a shudder.

Adrian shrugged. "It's really good."

I shook my head in disgust. "Oh, man. Rich people suck."

His amusement continued. "What are you doing here, little dhampir? Are you following me around?"

"Of course not," I scoffed. He was dressed to perfection, as always. "Especially not after all the trouble you've gotten us into."

He flashed one of his tantalizing smiles, and despite how much he annoyed me, I again felt that overwhelming urge to be near him. What was up with that?

"I don't know," he teased. He looked perfectly sane now, exhibiting no trace of the weird behavior I'd witnessed in his room. And yeah, he looked *a lot* better in a tuxedo than any guy I'd seen in there so far. "As many times as we keep seeing each other? This is, what, the fifth time? It's starting to look suspicious. Don't worry, though. I won't tell your boyfriend. Either of them."

I opened my mouth to protest, then remembered he'd seen me with Dimitri earlier. I refused to blush. "I only have *one* boyfriend. Sort of. Maybe not anymore. And anyway, there's nothing to tell. I don't even like you."

"No?" asked Adrian, still smiling. He leaned toward me, like he had a secret to share. "Then why are you wearing my perfume?"

This time, I did blush. I took a step back. "I'm not."

He laughed. "Of course you are. I counted the boxes after you left. Besides, I can smell it on you. It's nice. Sharp . . . but still sweet—just like I'm sure you are deep down inside. And you got it right, you know. Just enough to add an edge . . . but not enough to drown your own scent." The way he said "scent" made it sound

like a dirty word.

Royal Moroi might make me uncomfortable, but smartass guys hitting on me didn't. I dealt with them on a regular basis. I shook off my shyness and remembered who I was.

"Hey," I said, tossing my hair back. "I had every right to take one. You offered them. Your mistake is in assuming me taking one means anything. It doesn't. Except that maybe you should be more careful with where you dump all that money of yours."

"Ooh, Rose Hathaway is here to play, folks." He paused and took a glass of what looked like champagne from a passing waiter. "You want one?"

"I don't drink."

"Right." Adrian handed me a glass anyway, then shooed the waiter away and took a drink of the champagne. I had a feeling it wasn't his first of the night. "So. Sounds like our Vasilisa put my dad in his place."

"Your . . ." I glanced back at the group I'd just left. Silver Hair still stood there, gesticulating wildly. "That guy's your dad?"

"That's what my mom says."

"You agree with him? About how Moroi fighting would be suicide?"

Adrian shrugged and took another sip. "I don't really have an opinion on that."

"That's not possible. How can you not feel one way or another?"

"Dunno. Just not something I think about. I've got better things to do."

"Like stalk me," I suggested. "And Lissa." I still wanted to know why she'd been in his room.

He smiled again. "I told you, you're the one following me."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. Five times—" I stopped. "Five times?"

He nodded.

"No, it's only been four." With my free hand, I ticked them off. "There was that first night, the night at the spa, then when I came to your room, and now tonight."

The smile turned secretive. "If you say so."

"I *do* say so. . . ." Again, my words trailed off. I had talked to Adrian one other time. Sort of. "You can't mean . . ."

"Mean what?" A curious, eager expression lit his eyes. It was more hopeful than presumptuous.

I swallowed, recalling the dream. "Nothing." Without thinking about it, I took a drink of champagne. Across the room, Lissa's feelings burned back to me, calm and content. Good.

"Why are you smiling?" Adrian asked.

"Because Lissa's still over there, working that crowd."

"No surprise there. She's one of those people who can charm anyone she wants if she tries hard enough. Even people who hate her."

I gave him a wry look. "I feel that way when I talk to you."

"But you don't hate me," he said, finishing the last of his champagne. "Not really."

"I don't like you either."

"So you keep saying." He took a step toward me, not threatening, just making the space between us more intimate. "But I can live with that."

"Rose!"

The sharpness of my mother's voice cut through the air. A few people within earshot glanced over at us. My mother—all five angry feet of her—stormed up to us.

SEVENTEEN

"WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE doing?" she demanded. Her voice was still too loud as far as I was concerned.

"Nothing, I—"

"Excuse us, Lord Ivashkov," she growled. Then, like I was five years old, she grabbed me by my arm and jerked me out of the room. Champagne sloshed out of my glass and splashed onto the skirt of my dress.

"What do you think *you're* doing?" I exclaimed, once we were out in the hall. Mournfully, I looked down at my dress. "This is *silk*. You could have ruined it."

She grabbed the champagne flute and set it down on a nearby table. "Good. Maybe it'll stop you from dressing up like a cheap whore."

"Whoa," I said, shocked. "That's kind of harsh. And where do you get off turning motherly all of a sudden?" I gestured to the dress. "This isn't exactly cheap. You thought it was nice of Tasha to give it to me."

"That's because I didn't expect you to wear it out with Moroi and make a spectacle of yourself."

"I'm not making a spectacle of myself. And anyway, it covers everything up."

"A dress that tight might as well be showing everything," she retorted. She, of course, was dressed in guardian black: tailored black linen pants and a matching blazer. She had a few curves of her own, but the clothing hid them.

"Especially when you're with a group like that. Your body's . . . conspicuous. And flirting with Moroi doesn't really help."

"I wasn't flirting with him."

The accusation made me angry because I felt I'd been on really good behavior lately. I used to flirt all the time— and do other things—with Moroi guys, but after a few talks and one embarrassing incident with Dimitri, I'd realized how stupid that was. Dhampir girls did have to be careful with Moroi guys, and I kept that in mind all the time now.

Something petty occurred to me. "Besides," I said mockingly, "isn't that what I'm supposed to do? Hook up with a Moroi and further my race? It's what *you* did."

She glowered. "Not when I was your age."

"You were only a few years older than me."

"Don't do anything stupid, Rose," she said. "You're too young for a baby. You don't have the life experience for it— you haven't even lived your own life yet. You won't be able to do the kind of job you wish you could."

I groaned, mortified. “Are we really even discussing this? How did we go from me allegedly flirting to suddenly having a litter? I’m not having sex with him or anyone else, and even if I were, I know about birth control. Why are you talking to me like I’m a child?”

“Because you act like one.” It was remarkably like what Dimitri had told me.

I glared. “So you’re going to send me to my room now?”

“No, Rose.” She suddenly looked tired. “You don’t have to go to your room, but don’t go back in there, either. Hopefully you didn’t draw too much attention.”

“You make it sound like I was giving a lap dance in there,” I told her. “I just had dinner with Lissa.”

“You’d be surprised what things can spark rumors,” she warned. “Especially with Adrian Ivashkov.”

With that, she turned and headed off down the hall. Watching her, I felt anger and resentment burn through me. Overreact much? I hadn’t done anything wrong. I knew she had her whole blood-whore paranoia, but this was extreme, even for her. Worst of all, she’d dragged me out of there, and several people had witnessed it. For someone who supposedly didn’t want me attracting attention, she’d kind of messed that one up.

A couple of Moroi who’d been standing near Adrian and me walked out of the room. They glanced in my direction and then whispered something as they passed.

“Thanks, Mom,” I muttered to myself.

Humiliated, I stalked off in the opposite direction, not really sure where I was going. I headed out toward the back of the lodge, away from all the activity.

The hall eventually ended, but a door leading to some stairs sat on the left. The door was unlocked, so I followed the stairs upward to another door. To my pleasure, it opened up onto a small rooftop deck that didn’t appear to see much use. A blanket of snow lay over it all, but it was early morning out here, and the sun shone brightly, making everything glitter.

I brushed snow off of a large, box-like object that looked to be part of the ventilation system. Heedless of my dress, I sat down on it. Wrapping my arms around myself, I stared off, taking in the view and the sun I rarely got to enjoy.

I was startled when the door opened a few minutes later. When I looked back I was even more startled still to see Dimitri emerge. My heart gave a small flutter, and I turned away, unsure what to think. His boots crunched in the snow as he walked over to where I was sitting. A moment later, he took off his long coat and draped it over my shoulders.

He sat down beside me. “You must be freezing.”

I was, but I didn’t want to admit it. “The sun’s out.”

He tipped his head back, looking up at the perfect blue sky. I knew he missed the sun as much as I did sometimes. “It is. But we’re still on a mountain in the middle of winter.”

I didn’t answer. We sat there in a comfortable silence for a while. Occasionally, a light wind blew clouds of snow around. It was night for Moroi, and most would be going to bed soon, so the ski runs were quiet.

“My life is a disaster,” I finally said.

“It’s not a disaster,” he said automatically.

“Did you follow me from the party?”

"Yes."

"I didn't even know you were there." His dark clothes indicated he must have been on guardian duty at the party. "So you saw the illustrious Janine cause a commotion by dragging me out."

"It wasn't a commotion. Hardly anyone noticed. I saw because I was watching you."

I refused to let myself get excited over that. "That's not what she said," I told him. "I might as well have been working a corner as far as she was concerned."

I relayed the conversation from the hallway.

"She's just worried about you," Dimitri said when I finished.

"She overreacted."

"Sometimes mothers are overprotective."

I stared at him. "Yeah, but this is *my* mother. And she didn't seem that protective, really. I think she was more worried I'd embarrass her or something. And all that becoming-a-mother-too -young stuff was stupid. I'm not going to do anything like that."

"Maybe she wasn't talking about you," he said.

More silence. My jaw fell open.

You don't have the life experience for it—you haven't even lived your own life yet. You won't be able to do the kind of job you wish you could.

My mom had been twenty when I was born. Growing up, that had always seemed really old to me. But now . . . that was only a few years off for me. Not old at all. Did she think she'd had me too soon? Had she done a shoddy job raising me simply because she didn't know any better at the time? Did she regret the way things had turned out between us? And was it . . . was it *maybe* possible that she'd had some personal experience of her own with Moroi men and people spreading rumors about her? I'd had inherited a lot of her features. I mean, I'd even noticed tonight what a nice figure she had. She had a pretty face, too—for a nearly forty-year-old, I mean. She'd probably been really, really good-looking when she was younger. . . .

I sighed. I didn't want to think about that. If I did, I might have to reevaluate my relationship with her—maybe even acknowledge my mother as a real person—and I already had too many relationships stressing me. Lissa always worried me, even though she seemed to be okay for a change. My so-called romance with Mason was in shambles. And then, of course, there was Dimitri. . . .

"We aren't fighting right now." I blurted out.

He gave me a sidelong look. "Do you want to fight?"

"No. I hate fighting with you. Verbally, I mean. I don't mind in the gym."

I thought I detected the hint of a smile. Always a half-smile for me. Rarely a full one. "I don't like fighting with you either."

Sitting next to him there, I marveled at the warm and happy emotions springing up inside of me. There was something about being around him that felt so good, that moved me in a way Mason couldn't. You can't force love, I realized. It's there or it isn't. If it's not there, you've got to be able to admit it. If it is there, you've got to do whatever it takes to protect the ones you love.

The next words that came out of my mouth astonished me, both because they were completely unselfish and because I actually meant them.

"You should take it."

He flinched. “What?”

“Tasha’s offer. You should take her up on it. It’s a really great chance.”

I remembered my mom’s words about being ready for children. I wasn’t. Maybe she hadn’t been. But Tasha was. And I knew Dimitri was too. They got along really well. He could go be her guardian, have some kids with her . . . it would be a good deal for both of them.

“I never expected to hear you say anything like that,” he told me, voice tight. “Especially after—”

“What a bitch I’ve been? Yeah.” I tugged his coat tighter against the cold. It smelled like him. It was intoxicating, and I could half-imagine being wrapped in his embrace. Adrian might have been onto something about the power of scent. “Well. Like I said, I don’t want to fight anymore. I don’t want us to hate each other. And . . . well . . .” I squeezed my eyes shut and then opened them. “No matter how I feel about *us* . . . I want you to be happy.”

Silence yet again. I noticed then that my chest hurt.

Dimitri reached out and put his arm around me. He pulled me to him, and I rested my head on his chest. “Roza,” was all he said.

It was the first time he’d *really* touched me since the night of the lust charm. The practice room had been something different . . . more animal. This wasn’t even about sex. It was just about being close to someone you cared about, about the emotion that kind of connection flooded you with.

Dimitri might run off with Tasha, but I would still love him. I would probably always love him.

I cared about Mason. But I would probably never love him.

I sighed into Dimitri, just wishing I could stay like that forever. It felt right being with him. And—no matter how much the thought of him and Tasha made me ache—doing what was best for him felt right. Now, I knew, it was time to stop being a coward and do something else that was right. Mason had said I needed to learn something about myself. I just had.

Reluctantly, I pulled away and handed Dimitri his coat. I stood up. He regarded me curiously, sensing my unease.

“Where you going?” he asked.

“To break someone’s heart,” I replied.

I admired Dimitri for a heartbeat more—the dark, knowing eyes and silken hair. Then I headed inside. I had to apologize to Mason . . . and tell him there’d never be anything between us.

EIGHTEEN

THE HIGH HEELS WERE STARTING to hurt me, so I took them off when I went back inside, walking barefoot through the lodge. I hadn't been to Mason's room, but I remembered him mentioning the number once and found it without difficulty.

Shane, Mason's roommate, opened the door a few moments after I knocked. "Hey, Rose."

He stepped aside for me, and I walked in, peering around. Some infomercial was playing on the TV—one downside of a nocturnal life was a shortage of good programming—and empty soda cans covered nearly every flat surface. There was no sign of Mason anywhere.

"Where is he?" I asked.

Shane stifled a yawn. "I thought he was with you."

"I haven't seen him all day."

He yawned again, then frowned in thought. "He was throwing some stuff in a bag earlier. I figured you guys were running off for some crazy romantic getaway. Picnic or something. Hey, nice dress."

"Thanks," I murmured, feeling a frown of my own coming on.

Packing a bag? That didn't make any sense. There was nowhere to go. There was no *way* to go, either. This resort was as tightly guarded as the Academy. Lissa and I had only managed to break out of that place with compulsion, and it had still been a pain in the ass. Yet, why on earth would Mason pack a bag if he wasn't leaving?

I asked Shane a few more questions and decided to follow up on the possibility, crazy as it seemed. I found the guardian in charge of security and scheduling. He gave me the names of those guardians who'd been on duty around the resort's borders when Mason had last been seen. Most of the names I knew, and most were off duty now, making them easy to find.

Unfortunately, the first couple hadn't seen Mason around today. When they asked why I wanted to know, I gave vague answers and hurried off. The third person on my list was a guy named Alan, a guardian who usually worked the Academy's lower campus. He was just coming in after skiing, taking his equipment off near the door. Recognizing me, he smiled as I approached.

"Sure, I saw him," he said, bending down to his boots.

Relief flooded over me. Until then, I hadn't realized how worried I'd been.

"Do you know where he is?"

“Nope. Let him and Eddie Castile . . . and, what’s her name, the Rinaldi girl, out through the north gate and didn’t see them after that.”

I stared. Alan continued unhooking his skis as though we were discussing slope conditions.

“You let Mason and Eddie . . . and *Mia* out?”

“Yup.”

“Um . . . why?”

He finished and looked back up at me, a kind of happy and bemused look on his face. “Because they asked me.”

An icy feeling started creeping through me. I found out which guardian had watched the north gate with Alan and immediately sought him out. That guardian gave me the same response. He’d let Mason, Eddie, and Mia out, no questions asked. And, like Alan, he didn’t seem to think there was anything wrong with that. He appeared almost dazed. It was a look I’d seen before . . . a look that came over people when Lissa used compulsion.

In particular, I’d seen it happen when Lissa didn’t want people to remember something very well. She could bury the memory in them, either erasing it all together or planting it for later. She was so good at compulsion, though, that she could just make people forget completely. For them to still have some memories meant someone who wasn’t as good at compulsion had worked on them.

Someone, say, like Mia.

I wasn’t the fainting type, but for just a moment, I felt like I could keel over. The world spun, and I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. When I could see again, my surroundings stayed stable. Okay. No problem. I would reason this out.

Mason, Eddie, and Mia had left the resort earlier today. Not only that, they had done it by using compulsion—which was utterly forbidden. They hadn’t told anyone. They’d left through the north gate. I’d seen a map of the resort. The north gate guarded a driveway that connected to the only semi-major road in the area, a small highway that led to a little town about twelve miles away. The town Mason had mentioned that had buses.

To Spokane.

Spokane—where this traveling pack of Strigoi and their humans might be living.

Spokane—where Mason could fulfill all his crazy dreams of slaying Strigoi.

Spokane—which he only knew about because of *me*.

“No, no, no,” I murmured to myself, almost running toward my room.

There, I stripped off the dress and changed into heavy winter clothes: boots, jeans, and a sweater. Grabbing my coat and gloves, I hurried back toward the door and then paused. I was acting without thinking. What was I actually going to do? I needed to tell someone, obviously . . . but that would get the trio in a lot of trouble. It would also tip Dimitri off that I’d gone and gossiped about the Spokane Strigoi information he’d told me in confidence as a sign of respecting my maturity.

I studied the time. It would take a while for anyone around the resort to know we were missing. *If* I could actually get out of the resort.

A few minutes later, I found myself knocking on Christian’s door. He answered, looking sleepy and cynical as usual.

“If you’ve come to apologize for her,” he told me loftily, “you can just go ahead

and—"

"Oh, shut up," I snapped. "This isn't about you."

Hastily, I relayed the details of what was going on. Even Christian didn't have a witty response for that one.

"So . . . Mason, Eddie, and Mia went to Spokane to hunt Strigoi?"

"Yes."

"Holy shit. Why didn't you go with them? Seems like something you'd do."

I resisted the urge to smack him. "Because I'm not insane! But I'm going to go get them before they do something even stupider."

That was when Christian caught on. "And what do you need from me?"

"I need to get off the resort's property. They got Mia to use compulsion on the guards. I need you to do the same thing. I know you've practiced it."

"I have," he agreed. "But . . . well . . ." For the first time ever, he looked embarrassed. "I'm not very good at it. And doing it on dhampirs is nearly impossible. Liss is a hundred times better than me. Or probably any Moroi."

"I know. But I don't want her to get in trouble."

He snorted. "But you don't mind if I do?"

I shrugged. "Not really."

"You're a piece of work, you know that?"

"Yeah. I do, actually."

So, five minutes later, he and I found ourselves trekking out to the north gate. The sun was coming up, so most everyone was inside. This was a good thing, and I hoped it'd make our escape that much easier.

Stupid, stupid, I kept thinking. This was going to blow up in our faces. Why had Mason done this? I knew he'd had this whole crazy vigilante attitude . . . and he'd certainly seemed upset that the guardians hadn't done anything about the recent attack. But still. Was he really that unhinged? He *had* to know how dangerous this was. Was it possible . . . was it possible *I'd* upset him so much with the making-out disaster that he'd gone off the deep end? Enough to go do this and get Mia and Eddie to join him? Not that those two would be hard to convince. Eddie would follow Mason anywhere, and Mia was almost as gung ho as Mason to kill every Strigoi in the world.

Yet, out of all the questions I had about this, one thing was definitely clear. I'd told Mason about the Strigoi in Spokane. Hands down, this was my fault, and without me, none of this would have happened.

"Lissa always makes eye contact," I coached Christian as we approached the exit. "And speaks in a really, like, calm voice. I don't know what else. I mean, she concentrates a lot too, so try that. Focus on forcing your will on them."

"I know," he snapped. "I've seen her do it."

"Fine," I snapped back. "Just trying to help."

Squinting, I saw that only one guardian stood at the gate, a total stroke of luck. They were in between shifts. With the sun out, the risk of Strigoi had disappeared. The guardians would still continue in their duties, but they could relax just a bit.

The guy on duty didn't seem particularly alarmed by our appearance. "What are you kids doing out here?"

Christian swallowed. I could see the lines of tension on his face.

"You're going to let us out of the gate," he said. A note of nervousness made his voice tremble, but otherwise, he did a fair approximation of Lissa's soothing

tones. Unfortunately, it had no effect on the guardian. As Christian had pointed out, using compulsion on a guardian was nearly impossible. Mia had gotten lucky. The guardian grinned at us.

"What?" he asked, clearly amused.

Christian tried again. "You're going to let us out."

The guy's smile faltered just a little, and I saw him blink in surprise. His eyes didn't glaze over in the same way Lissa's victims did, but Christian had done enough to briefly enthrall him. Unfortunately, I could tell right then and there that it wouldn't be enough to make him let us out and forget. Fortunately, I'd been trained to compel people without the use of magic.

Sitting near his post was an enormous Maglite, two feet long and easily seven pounds. I grabbed the Maglite and clocked him on the back of the head. He grunted and crumpled to the ground. He'd barely seen me coming, and despite the horribleness of what I'd just done, I kind of wished one of my instructors had been there to grade me on such an awesome performance.

"Jesus Christ," exclaimed Christian. "You just assaulted a guardian."

"Yeah." So much for getting the guys back without getting anyone in trouble. "I didn't know just how much you sucked at compulsion. I'll deal with the fallout later. Thanks for your help. You should head back before the next shift comes on."

He shook his head and grimaced. "No, I'm going with you on this."

"No," I argued. "I only needed you to get through the gate. You don't have to get in trouble over this."

"I'm already in trouble!" He pointed at the guardian. "He saw my face. I'm screwed either way, so I might as well help you save the day. Stop being a bitch for a change."

We hurried off, and I cast one last, guilty glance at the guardian. I was pretty sure I hadn't hit him hard enough to cause real damage, and with the sun coming out, he wouldn't freeze or anything.

After about five minutes of walking down the highway, I knew we had a problem. Despite being covered and wearing sunglasses, the sun was taking its toll on Christian. It was slowing us down, and it wouldn't take that long for someone to find the guardian I'd taken out and come after us.

A car—not one of the Academy's—appeared behind us, and I made a decision. I didn't approve of hitchhiking in the least. Even someone like me knew how dangerous it was. But we needed to get to town *fast*, and I prayed Christian and I could take down any creepy stalker guy who tried to mess with us.

Fortunately, when the car pulled over, it was just a middle-aged couple who looked more concerned than anything else. "You kids okay?"

I jerked my thumb behind me. "Our car slid off the road. Can you take us to town so I can call my dad?"

It worked. Fifteen minutes later, they dropped us off at a gas station. I actually had trouble getting rid of them because they wanted to help us so much. Finally, we convinced them we'd be fine, and we walked the few blocks over to the bus station. As I'd suspected, this town wasn't much of a hub for real travel. Three lines serviced the town: two that went to other ski resorts and one that went to Lowston, Idaho. From Lowston, you could go on to other places.

I'd half-hoped that we might beat Mason and the others before their bus came.

Then we could have hauled them back without any trouble. Unfortunately, there was no sign of them. The cheery woman at the counter knew exactly who we were talking about, too. She confirmed that all three of them had bought tickets to Spokane by way of Lowston.

"Damn it," I said. The woman raised her eyebrows at my language. I turned to Christian. "You got money for the bus?"

Christian and I didn't talk much along the way, except for me to tell him he'd been an idiot about Lissa and Adrian. By the time we reached Lowston, I finally had him convinced, which was a minor miracle. He slept the rest of the way to Spokane, but I couldn't. I just kept thinking over and over that this was my fault.

It was late afternoon by the time we reached Spokane. It took a few people, but we finally found someone who knew the shopping center Dimitri had mentioned. It was a long ways from the bus station, but it was walkable. My legs were stiff after almost five hours of riding a bus, and I wanted the movement. The sun was a while from setting, but it was lower and less detrimental to vampires, so Christian didn't mind the walk either.

And, as often happened when I was in calm settings, I felt a tug into Lissa's head. I let myself fall into her because I wanted to know what was happening back at the resort.

"I know you want to protect them, but we need to know where they are."

Lissa sat on the bed in our room while Dimitri and my mom stared her down. It was Dimitri who had spoken. Seeing him through her eyes was interesting. She had a fond respect for him, very different from the intense roller coaster of emotions I always experienced.

"I told you," said Lissa, "I don't know. I don't know what happened."

Frustration and fear for us burned through her. It saddened me to see her so anxious, but at the same time, I was glad I hadn't gotten her involved. She couldn't report what she didn't know.

"I can't believe they wouldn't have told you where they were going," said my mother. Her words sounded flat, but there were lines of worry on her face. "Especially with your . . . bond."

"It only works one way," said Lissa sadly. "You know that."

Dimitri knelt down so he could be at Lissa's height and look her in the eye. He pretty much had to do that to look anyone in the eye. "Are you sure there's nothing? Nothing at all you can tell us? They're nowhere in town. The man at the bus station didn't see them . . . though we're pretty sure that's where they must have gone. We need something, *anything* to go on."

Man at the bus station? That was another stroke of luck. The woman who'd sold us the tickets must have gone home. Her replacement wouldn't know us.

Lissa gritted her teeth and glared. "Don't you think if I knew, I'd tell you? You don't think I'm worried about them too? I have *no* idea where they are. None. And why'd they even leave . . . it doesn't make any sense either. Especially why they'd go with Mia, of all people." A twinge of hurt flickered through the bond, hurt at being left out of whatever we were doing, no matter how wrong.

Dimitri sighed and leaned back on his heels. From the look on his face, he obviously believed her. It was also obvious that he was worried—worried in more than a professional way. And seeing that concern—that concern for *me*—ate up my heart.

“Rose?” Christian’s voice brought me back to myself. “We’re here, I think.”

The plaza consisted of a wide, open area in front of a shopping center. A café was carved into a corner of the main building, its tables spilling out into the open area. A crowd moved in and out of the complex, busy even at this time of the day.

“So, how do we find them?” asked Christian.

I shrugged. “Maybe if we act like Strigoi, they’ll try to stake us.”

A small, reluctant smile played over his face. He didn’t want to admit it, but he’d thought my joke was funny.

He and I went inside. Like any mall, it was filled with familiar chains, and a selfish part of me thought that maybe if we found the group soon enough, we could still get in shopping time.

Christian and I walked the length of it twice and saw no signs of our friends or anything resembling tunnels.

“Maybe we’re in the wrong place,” I finally said.

“Or maybe *they* are,” suggested Christian. “They could have gone to some other —wait.”

He pointed, and I followed the gesture. The three renegades sat at a table in the middle of the food court, looking dejected. They looked so miserable, I almost felt sorry for them.

“I’d kill for a camera right now,” said Christian, smirking.

“This isn’t funny,” I told him, striding toward the group. Inside, I breathed a sigh of relief. The group clearly hadn’t found any Strigoi, were all still alive, and could maybe be taken back before we got in even more trouble.

They didn’t notice me until I was almost right next to them. Eddie’s head jerked up. “Rose? What are you doing here?”

“Are you out of your mind?” I yelled. A few people nearby gave us surprised looks. “Do you know how much trouble you’re in? How much trouble you’ve gotten *us* in?”

“How the hell did you find us?” asked Mason in a low voice, glancing anxiously around.

“You guys aren’t exactly criminal masterminds,” I told them. “Your informant at the bus station gave you away. That, and I figured out that you’d want to go off on your pointless Strigoi-hunting quest.”

The look Mason gave me revealed he still wasn’t entirely happy with me. It was Mia who replied, however.

“It isn’t pointless.”

“Oh?” I demanded. “Did you kill any Strigoi? Did you even find any?”

“No,” admitted Eddie.

“Good,” I said. “You got lucky.”

“Why are you so against killing Strigoi?” asked Mia hotly. “Isn’t that what you train for?”

“I train for sane missions, not childish stunts like this.”

“It isn’t childish,” she cried. “They killed my mother. And the guardians weren’t doing anything. Even their information is bad. There weren’t any Strigoi in the tunnels. Probably none in the whole city.”

Christian looked impressed. “You found the tunnels?”

“Yeah,” said Eddie. “But like she said, they were useless.”

“We should see them before we go,” Christian told me. “It’d be kind of cool,

and if the data was bad, there's no danger."

"No," I snapped. "We're going home. Now."

Mason looked tired. "We're going to search the city again. Even you can't make us go back, Rose."

"No, but the school's guardians can when I call and tell them you're here."

Call it blackmailing or being a tattletale; the effect was the same. The three of them looked at me like I had just simultaneously gut-punched them all.

"You'd really do that?" asked Mason. "You'd sell us out like that?"

I rubbed my eyes, wondering desperately why I was trying to be the voice of reason here. Where was the girl who'd run away from school? Mason had been right. I had changed.

"This isn't about selling anyone out. This is about keeping you guys alive."

"You think we're that defenseless?" asked Mia. "You think we'd get killed right away?"

"Yes," I said. "Unless you've found some way to use water as a weapon?"

She flushed and didn't say anything.

"We brought silver stakes," said Eddie.

Fantastic. They must have stolen them. I looked at Mason pleadingly.

"Mason. Please. Call this off. Let's go back."

He looked at me for a long time. Finally, he sighed. "Okay."

Eddie and Mia looked aghast, but Mason had assumed a leadership role with them, and they didn't have the initiative to go on without him. Mia seemed to take it the hardest, and I felt bad for her. She'd barely had any real time to grieve for her mother; she'd just jumped right on board with this revenge thing as a way to cope with the pain. She'd have a lot to deal with when we got back.

Christian was still excited about the idea of the underground tunnels. Considering he spent all his time in an attic, I shouldn't have been all that surprised.

"I saw the schedule," he told me. "We've got a while before the next bus."

"We can't go walking into some Strigoi lair," I argued, walking toward the mall's entrance.

"There are no Strigoi there," said Mason. "It's seriously all janitorial stuff. There was no sign of anything weird. I really do think the guardians had bad information."

"Rose," said Christian, "let's get something fun out of this."

They all looked at me. I felt like a mom who wouldn't buy her kids candy at the grocery store.

"Okay, fine. Just a peek, though."

The others led Christian and me to the opposite end of the mall, through a door marked STAFF ONLY. We dodged a couple of janitors, then slipped through another door that led us to a set of stairs going down. I had a brief moment of déjà vu, recalling the steps down to Adrian's spa party. Only these stairs were dirtier and smelled pretty nasty.

We reached the bottom. It wasn't so much a tunnel as a narrow corridor, lined in grime-caked cement. Ugly fluorescent lights were embedded sporadically along the walls. The passage went off to our left and right. Boxes of ordinary cleaning and electrical supplies sat around.

"See?" said Mason. "Boring."

I pointed in each direction. “What’s down there?”

“Nothing,” sighed Mia. “We’ll show you.”

We walked down to the right and found more of the same. I was starting to agree with the boring assessment when we passed some black writing on one of the walls. I stopped and looked at it. It was a list of letters.

D

B

C

O

T

D

V

L

D

Z

S

I

Some had lines and *x* marks next to them, but for the most part the message was incoherent. Mia noticed my scrutiny.

“It’s probably a janitor thing,” she said. “Or maybe some gang did it.”

“Probably,” I said, still studying it. The others shifted restlessly, not understanding my fascination with the jumble of letters. I didn’t understand my fascination either, but something in my head tugged at me to stay.

Then I got it.

B for *Badica*, *Z* for *Zeklos*, *I* for *Ivashkov* . . .

I stared. The first letter of every royal family’s name was there. There were three *D* names, but based on the order, you could actually read the list as a size ranking. It started with the smaller families—Dragomir, Badica, Conta—and went all the way up to the giant Ivashkov clan. I didn’t understand the dashes and lines

beside the letters, but I quickly noticed which names had an *x* beside them: Badica and Drozdov.

I stepped back from the wall. “We have to get out of here,” I said. My own voice scared me a little. “Right now.”

The others looked at me in surprise. “Why?” asked Eddie. “What’s going on?”

“I’ll tell you later. We just need to go.”

Mason pointed in the direction we’d been heading. “This lets out a few blocks away. It’s closer to the station.”

I peered down into the dark unknown. “No,” I said. “We’re going back the way we came.”

They all looked at me like I was insane as we retraced our steps, but nobody questioned me yet. When we emerged from the mall’s front, I breathed a sigh of relief to see that the sun was still out, though it was steadily sinking into the horizon and casting orange and red light onto the buildings. The remaining light would still be enough for us to get back to the bus station before we were really in any danger of seeing Strigoi.

And I knew now that there really were Strigoi in Spokane. Dimitri’s information had been correct. I didn’t know what the list meant, but it clearly had something to do with the attacks. I needed to report it to the other guardians immediately, and I certainly couldn’t tell the others what I’d realized until we were safely at the lodge. Mason was likely to go back into the tunnels if he knew what I did.

Most of our walk back to the station proceeded in silence. I think my mood had cowed the others. Even Christian seemed to have run out of snide comments. Inside, my emotions swirled, oscillating between anger and guilt as I kept reexamining my role in everything.

Ahead of me, Eddie stopped walking, and I nearly ran into him. He looked around. “Where are we?”

Snapping out of my own thoughts, I surveyed the area too. I didn’t remember these buildings. “Damn it,” I exclaimed. “Are we lost? Didn’t anyone keep track of which way we went?”

It was an unfair question since I clearly hadn’t paid attention either, but my temper had pushed me past reason. Mason studied me for a few moments, then pointed. “This way.”

We turned and walked down a narrow street between two buildings. I didn’t think we were going the right way, but I didn’t really have a better idea. I also didn’t want to stand around debating.

We hadn’t gone very far when I heard the sound of an engine and squealing tires. Mia was walking in the middle of the road, and protective conditioning kicked in before I even saw what was coming. Grabbing her, I jerked her out of the street and up against one of the building walls. The boys had done the same.

A large, gray van with tinted windows had rounded the corner and was headed in our direction. We pressed flat against the wall, waiting for it to go past.

Only it didn’t.

Screeching to a halt, it stopped right in front of us, and the doors slid open. Three big guys spilled out, and again, my instincts kicked in. I had no clue who they were or what they wanted, but they clearly weren’t friendly. That was all I needed to know.

One of them moved toward Christian, and I struck out and punched him. The

guy barely staggered but was clearly surprised to have felt it at all, I think. He probably hadn't expected someone as small as me to be much of a threat. Ignoring Christian, he moved toward me. In my peripheral vision, I saw Mason and Eddie squaring off with the other two. Mason had actually pulled out his stolen silver stake. Mia and Christian stood there, frozen.

Our attackers were relying a lot on bulk. They didn't have the sort of background we had in offensive and defensive techniques. Plus, they were human, and we had dhampir strength. Unfortunately, we also had the disadvantage of being cornered against the wall. We had nowhere to retreat to. Most importantly, we had something to lose.

Like Mia.

The guy who'd been sparring with Mason seemed to realize this. He backed off from Mason and instead grabbed her. I barely saw the flash of his gun before its barrel was pressed against her neck. Backing off from my own adversary, I yelled at Eddie to stop. We'd all been trained to respond instantly to those kinds of orders, and he halted his attack, glancing at me questioningly. When he saw Mia, his face went pale.

I wanted nothing more than to keep pummeling these men—whoever they were—but I couldn't risk this guy hurting Mia. He knew it, too. He didn't even have to make the threat. He was human, but he knew enough about us to know that we'd go out of our way to protect the Moroi. Novices had a saying grilled into us from an early age: *Only they matter*.

Everyone stopped and looked between him and me. Apparently we were the acknowledged leaders here. "What do you want?" I asked harshly.

The guy pressed his gun closer to Mia's neck, and she whimpered. For all her talk about fighting, she was smaller than me and not nearly as strong. And she was too terrified to move.

The man inclined his head toward the van's open door. "I want you to get inside. And don't start anything. You do, and she's gone."

I looked at Mia, the van, my other friends, and then back to the guy. Shit.

NINETEEN

I HATE BEING POWERLESS. I hate going down without a fight. What had taken place outside in the alley hadn't been a real fight. If it had—if I'd been beaten into submission . . . well, yeah. Maybe I could accept that. Maybe. But I hadn't been beaten. I'd barely gotten my hands dirty. Instead, I'd gone quietly.

Once they had us sitting on the floor of the van, they'd bound each of our hands behind our back with flex-cuffs— strips of plastic that cinched together and held just as well as anything made of metal.

After that, we rode in near silence. The men occasionally murmured something to each other, speaking too softly for any of us to hear. Christian or Mia might have been able to understand the words, but they were in no position to communicate anything to the rest of us. Mia looked as terrified as she had out on the street, and while Christian's fear had rapidly given way to his typical haughty anger, even he didn't dare act out with guards nearby.

I was glad for Christian's self-control. I didn't doubt any of these men would smack him if he got out of line, and neither I nor the other novices were in a position to stop them. That was what really drove me crazy. The instinct to protect Moroi was so deeply ingrained in me that I couldn't even pause to worry about myself. Christian and Mia were the focus. They were the ones I had to get out of this mess.

And how had this mess started? Who were these guys? That was a mystery. They were human, but I didn't believe for an instant that a group of dhampirs and Moroi had been random kidnapping victims. We'd been targeted for a reason.

Our captors made no attempts to blindfold us or conceal our route, which I didn't take as a good sign. Did they think we didn't know the city well enough to retrace our steps? Or did they figure it didn't matter since we wouldn't be leaving wherever they were taking us? All I sensed was that we were driving away from downtown, off toward a more suburban area. Spokane was as dull as I'd imagined. Unlike where pristine white snow lay in drifts, slushy gray puddles lined the streets and dirty patches dotted the lawns. There were also a lot fewer evergreen trees than I was used to. The scraggly, leafless deciduous trees here seemed skeletal by comparison. They only added to the mood of impending doom.

After what felt like less than an hour, the van turned down a quiet cul-de-sac, and we drove up to a very ordinary—yet large—house. Other houses—identical in the way suburban homes often are—stood nearby, which gave me hope. Maybe

we could get some help from the neighbors.

We pulled inside the garage, and once the door was back down, the men ushered us into the house. It looked a lot more interesting on the inside. Antique, claw-footed sofas and chairs. A large, saltwater fish tank. Swords crossed over the fireplace. One of those stupid modern art paintings that consisted of a few lines splayed across the canvas.

The part of me that enjoyed destroying things would have liked to study the swords in detail, but the main floor wasn't our destination. Instead, we were led down a narrow flight of stairs, down to a basement as large as the floor above. Only, unlike the main floor's open space, the basement was sectioned off into a series of halls and closed doors. It was like a rat's maze. Our captors led us through it without hesitation, into a small room with a concrete floor and unpainted dry-wall.

The furniture inside consisted of several very uncomfortable-looking wooden chairs with slatted backs—backs that proved to be a convenient place for rebinding our hands. The men seated us in such a way that Mia and Christian sat on one side of the room, and the rest of us dhampirs sat on the other. One guy—the leader, apparently—watched carefully as one of his henchmen bound Eddie's hands with new flex-cuffs.

"These are the ones you especially have to watch," he warned, nodding toward us. "They'll fight back." His eyes traveled first to Eddie's face, then Mason's, and then mine. The guy and I held each other's gaze for several moments, and I scowled. He looked back over at his associate. "Watch *her* in particular."

When we'd been restrained to his satisfaction, he barked out a few more orders to the others and then left the room, shutting the door loudly behind him. His steps echoed through the house as he walked upstairs. Moments later, silence fell.

We sat there, staring at each other. After several minutes, Mia whimpered and started to speak. "What are you going to—"

"Shut up," growled one of the men. He took a warning step toward her. Blanching, she cringed but still looked as though she might say something else. I caught her eye and shook my head. She stayed silent, eyes wide and a slight tremble to her lip.

There's nothing worse than waiting and not knowing what'll happen to you. Your own imagination can be crueler than any captor. Since our guards wouldn't talk to us or tell us what was in store, I imagined all sorts of horrible scenarios. The guns were the obvious threat, and I found myself pondering what a bullet would feel like. Painful, presumably. And where would they shoot? Through the heart or the head? Quick death. But somewhere else? Like the stomach? That would be slow and painful. I shuddered at the thought of my life bleeding out of me. Thinking of all that blood put me in mind of the Badica house and maybe having our throats slit. These men could have knives as well as guns.

Of course, I had to wonder why we were still alive at all. Clearly they wanted something from us, but what? They weren't asking for information. And they were *human*. What would humans want with us? Usually the most we feared from humans was either running into crazy slayer types or those who wanted to experiment on us. These seemed like neither.

So what did they want? Why were we here? Over and over, I imagined more awful, gruesome fates. The looks on my friends' faces showed I wasn't the only

one who could envision creative torments. The smell of sweat and fear filled the room.

I lost track of time and was suddenly jolted out of my imaginings when footsteps sounded on the stairs. The lead captor stepped into the hall. The rest of the men straightened up, tension crackling around them. Oh God. This was it, I realized. This was what we'd been waiting for.

"Yes, sir," I heard the leader say. "They're in here, just like you wanted."

Finally, I realized. The person behind our kidnapping. Panic shot through me. I had to escape.

"Let us out of here!" I yelled, straining at my bindings. "Let us out of here, you son of a—"

I stopped. Something inside of me shriveled up. My throat went dry. My heart wanted to stop. The guard had returned with a man and a woman I didn't recognize. I did, however, recognize that they were . . .

... Strigoi.

Real, live—well, figuratively speaking—Strigoi. It all suddenly clicked together. It wasn't just the Spokane reports that had been true. What we'd feared—Strigoi working with humans—had come true. *This changes everything.* Daylight wasn't safe anymore. None of us were safe anymore. Worse, I realized these must be the rogue Strigoi—the ones who had attacked the two Moroi families with human help. Again, those horrible memories came to me: bodies and blood everywhere. Bile rose in my throat, and I tried to shift my thoughts from the past to the present situation. Not that that was any more reassuring.

Moroi had pale skin, the kind of skin that blushed and burned easily. But these vampires . . . their skin was white, chalky in a way that made it look like the result of a bad makeup job. The pupils of their eyes had a red ring around them, driving home what monsters they were.

The woman, actually, reminded me of Natalie—my poor friend whose father had convinced her to turn Strigoi. It took me a few moments to figure out what the resemblance was because they looked nothing alike. This woman was short—probably human before becoming Strigoi—and had brown hair with a bad highlighting job.

Then it hit me. This Strigoi was a new one, much as Natalie had been. It didn't become obvious until I compared her with the Strigoi man. The Strigoi woman's face had a little life in it. But his . . . his was the face of death.

His face was completely devoid of any sort of warmth or gentler emotion. His expression was cold and calculating, laced with malicious amusement. He was tall, as tall as Dimitri, and had a slender frame that indicated he'd been Moroi before changing over. Shoulder-length black hair framed his face and stood out against the bright scarlet of his dress shirt. His eyes were so dark and brown that without the red ring, it would have been almost impossible to tell where pupil ended and iris began.

One of the guards shoved me hard, even though I'd been silent. He glanced up at the Strigoi man. "You want me to gag her?"

I suddenly realized I'd been hunching into the back of my chair, unconsciously trying to get as far away from him as possible. He realized this too, and a thin, toothless smile crossed his lips.

"No," he said. His voice was silky and low. "I'd like to hear what she has to

say." He raised an eyebrow at me. "Please. Continue."

I swallowed.

"No? Nothing to add? Well. Do feel free to pipe up if something else comes to mind."

"Isaiah," exclaimed the woman. "Why are you keeping them here? Why haven't you just contacted the others?"

"Elena, Elena," Isaiah murmured to her. "Behave yourself. I'm not going to pass up the chance to enjoy myself with two Moroi and . . ." He walked behind my chair and lifted my hair, making me shudder. A moment later, he peered at Mason and Eddie's necks as well. ". . . three unblooded dhampirs." He spoke those words with an almost happy sigh, and I realized he'd been looking for guardian tattoos.

Strolling over to Mia and Christian, Isaiah rested a hand on his hip as he studied them. Mia could only meet his eyes for an instant before looking away. Christian's fear was palpable, but he managed to return the Strigoi's scrutiny. It made me proud.

"Look at these eyes, Elena." Elena walked over and stood beside Isaiah as he spoke. "That pale blue. Like ice. Like aquamarines. You almost never get that outside of the royal houses. Badicas. Ozeras. The occasional Zeklos."

"Ozera," said Christian, trying very hard to sound fearless.

Isaiah tilted his head. "Really? Surely not . . ." He leaned closer to Christian. "But the age is right . . . and that hair . . ." He smiled. "Lucas and Moira's son?"

Christian said nothing, but the confirmation on his face was obvious.

"I knew your parents. Great people. Unparalleled. Their deaths were a shame . . . but, well . . . I daresay they brought that on themselves. I *told* them they shouldn't have gone back for you. Would have been wasteful to awaken you so young. They claimed they were going to just keep you around and waken you when you were older. I warned them that that would be a disaster, but, well . . ." He gave a delicate shrug. "Awaken" was the term Strigoi used among themselves when they changed over. It sounded like a religious experience. "They wouldn't listen, and disaster met them in a different way."

Hatred, deep and dark, boiled behind Christian's eyes. Isaiah smiled again.

"It's quite touching that you should find your way to me after all this time. Perhaps I can realize their dream after all."

"Isaiah," said the woman—Elena—again. Every word out of her mouth seemed like a whine. "Call the others—"

"Stop giving me orders!" Isaiah grabbed her shoulder and shoved her away—except that the push knocked her across the room and almost through the wall. She just barely threw her hand out in time to stop the impact. Strigoi had better reflexes than dhampirs or even Moroi; her lack of grace meant he'd completely caught her off guard. And really, he'd barely touched her. The push had been light—yet it had packed the force of a small car.

This further enforced my belief that he was in another class altogether. His strength beat hers by magnitudes. She was like a fly he could swat away. Strigoi power increased with age— as well as through the consumption of Moroi blood and, to a lesser extent, dhampir blood. This guy wasn't just old, I realized. He was ancient. And he'd drunk *a lot* of blood over the years. Terror filled Elena's features, and I could understand her fear. Strigoi turned against each other all the

time. He could have ripped her head off if he wanted.

She cowered, averting her eyes. “I . . . I’m sorry, Isaiah.”

Isaiah smoothed his shirt—not that it had been wrinkled. His voice took on the cold pleasantness he’d affected earlier. “You clearly have opinions here, Elena, and I welcome you voicing them in a civilized manner. What do you think we should do with these cubs?”

“You should—that is, I think we should just take them now. Especially the Moroi.” She was clearly working hard not to whine again and annoy him. “Unless . . . you aren’t going to throw another dinner party, are you? It’s a complete waste. We’ll have to share, and you know the others won’t be grateful. They *never* are.”

“I’m not making a dinner party out of them,” he declared loftily. Dinner party? “But I’m not killing them yet either. You’re young, Elena. You only think about immediate gratification. When you’re as old as me, you won’t be so . . . impatient.”

She rolled her eyes when he wasn’t looking.

Turning, he swept his gaze over me, Mason, and Eddie. “You three, I’m afraid, are going to die. There’s no avoiding it. I’d like to say I’m sorry, but, well, I’m not. Such is the way of the world. You do have a choice in how you die, however, and that will be dictated by your behavior.” His eyes lingered on me. I didn’t really get why everyone seemed to be singling me out as the troublemaker here. Well, maybe I did. “Some of you will die more painfully than others.”

I didn’t need to see Mason and Eddie to know their fear mirrored mine. I was pretty sure I even heard Eddie whimper.

Isaiah abruptly turned on his heels, military-style, and faced Mia and Christian. “You two, fortunately, have options. Only one of you will die. The other will live on in glorious immortality. I’ll even be kind enough to take you under my wing until you’re a little older. Such is my charity.”

I couldn’t help it. I choked on a laugh.

Isaiah spun around and stared at me. I fell silent and waited for him to throw me across the room like he had Elena, but he did nothing else but stare. It was enough. My heart raced, and I felt tears brim in my eyes. My fear shamed me. I wanted to be like Dimitri. Maybe even like my mother. After several long, agonizing moments, Isaiah turned back to the Moroi.

“Now. As I was saying, one of you will be awakened and live forever. But it will not be me who wakens you. You will choose to be awakened willingly.”

“Not likely,” said Christian. He packed as much snarky defiance as he could manage into those two words, but it was still obvious to everyone else in the room that he was scared out of his mind.

“Ah, how I love the Ozera spirit,” mused Isaiah. He glanced at Mia, his red eyes gleaming. She shrank back in fear. “But don’t let him upstage you, my dear. There’s strength in common blood, too. And here’s how it will be decided.” He pointed at us dhampirs. His gaze chilled me all over, and I imagined I could smell the stink of decay. “If you want to live, all you have to do is kill one of these three.” He turned back to the Moroi. “That’s it. Not unpleasant at all. Just tell one of these gentlemen here you want to do it. They’ll release you. Then you drink from them and are awakened as one of us. Whoever does this first walks free. The other will be dinner for Elena and me.”

Silence hung in the room.

"No," said Christian. "No way am I killing one of my friends. I don't care what you do. I'll die first."

Isaiah waved a dismissive hand. "Easy to be brave when you aren't hungry. Go a few days without any other sustenance . . . and yes, these three will start to look *very* good. And they are. Dhampirs are delicious. Some prefer them to Moroi, and while I myself have never shared such beliefs, I can certainly appreciate the variety."

Christian scowled.

"Don't believe me?" asked Isaiah. "Then let me prove it." He walked back over to my side of the room. I realized what he was going to do and spoke without fully thinking things through.

"Use me," I blurted out. "Drink from me."

Isaiah's smug look faltered for a moment, and his eyebrows rose. "You're volunteering?"

"I've done it before. Let Moroi feed off me, I mean. I don't mind. I like it. Leave the rest of them alone."

"Rose!" exclaimed Mason.

I ignored him and looked beseechingly at Isaiah. I didn't want him to feed off me. The thought made me sick. But I *had* given blood before, and I'd rather him take pints from me before he touched Eddie or Mason.

I couldn't read his expression as he sized me up. For half a second, I thought he might go for it, but instead he shook his head.

"No. Not you. Not yet."

He walked over and stood before Eddie. I pulled against my flex-cuffs so hard that they dug painfully into my skin. They didn't give. "No! Leave him alone!"

"Quiet," snapped Isaiah, without looking at me. He rested one hand on the side of Eddie's face. Eddie trembled and had gone so pale, I thought he would faint. "I can make this easy, or I can make it hurt. Your silence will encourage the former."

I wanted to scream, wanted to call Isaiah all sorts of names and make all sorts of threats. But I couldn't. My eyes flicked around the room, searching for exits, as I had so many times before. But there were none. Just blank, bare white walls. No windows. The one precious door, always guarded. I was helpless, just as helpless as I'd been from the moment they'd pulled us into the van. I felt like crying, more from frustration than fear. What kind of guardian would I be if I couldn't protect my friends?

But I stayed quiet, and a look of satisfaction crossed Isaiah's face. The fluorescent lighting gave his skin a sickly, grayish hue, emphasizing the dark circles under his eyes. I wanted to punch him.

"Good." He smiled at Eddie and held his face so that the two made direct eye contact. "Now, you won't fight me, will you?"

As I've mentioned, Lissa was good at compulsion. But she couldn't have done this. In seconds, Eddie was smiling.

"No. I won't fight you."

"Good," repeated Isaiah. "And you'll give me your neck freely, won't you?"

"Of course," replied Eddie, tilting his head back.

Isaiah brought his mouth down, and I looked away, trying to focus on the

threadbare carpet instead. I didn't want to see this. I heard Eddie emit a soft, happy moan. The feeding itself was relatively quiet—no slurping or anything like that.

"There."

I glanced back when I heard Isaiah speak again. Blood dripped from his lips, and he ran his tongue across them. I couldn't see the wound on Eddie's neck, but I suspected it was bloody and horrible too. Mia and Christian stared wide-eyed, both with fear and fascination. Eddie gazed off in a happy, drugged haze, high from both the endorphins and the compulsion.

Isaiah straightened up and smiled at the Moroi, licking the last of the blood off his lips. "You see?" he told them, moving toward the door. "It's just that easy."

TWENTY

WE NEEDED AN ESCAPE PLAN, and we needed it fast. Unfortunately, my only ideas called for things that really weren't under my control. Like us being left completely alone so we could sneak off. Or having stupid guards whom we could easily fool and slip away from. At the very least, we should have been sloppily secured so that we could break free.

None of that was happening, though. After almost twenty-four hours, our situations hadn't really changed. We were still prisoners, still securely bound. Our captors stayed vigilant, almost as efficient as any group of guardians. Almost.

The closest we got to freedom was heavily supervised— and extremely embarrassing—bathroom breaks. The men gave us no food or water. That was rough on me, but the human and vampire mix made dhampirs hardy. I could handle being uncomfortable, even though I was fast reaching a point where I would have killed for a cheeseburger and some really, really greasy french fries.

For Mia and Christian . . . well, things were a little harder. Moroi could go weeks without food and water if they were still getting blood. Without blood, they could manage a few days before getting sick and weak, so long as they still had other sustenance. That was how Lissa and I had managed while living on our own, since I hadn't been able to feed her every day.

Take away food, blood, and water, and Moroi endurance dropped through the floor. I was hungry, but Mia and Christian were ravenous. Already, their faces looked gaunt, their eyes almost feverish. Isaiah made matters worse during his subsequent visits. Each time, he would come down and ramble on in his annoying, taunting way. Then, before leaving, he'd take another drink from Eddie. By the third visit, I could practically see Mia and Christian salivating. Between the endorphins and lack of food, I was pretty sure Eddie didn't even know where we were.

I couldn't really sleep under these conditions, but during the second day, I started nodding off now and then. Starvation and exhaustion will do that to you. At one point, I actually dreamed, surprising since I didn't really think I could fall into a deep slumber under such insane conditions.

In the dream—and I knew perfectly well that it was a dream—I stood on a beach. It took me a moment to recognize just which beach it was. It was along the Oregon coast— sandy and warm, with the Pacific unfolding in the distance. Lissa and I had traveled out here once when we lived in Portland. It had been a gorgeous day, but she couldn't handle being out in that much sun. We'd kept the

visit short as a result, but I'd always wished I could have stayed longer and basked in all that. Now I had all the light and warmth I could want.

"Little dhampir," said a voice behind me. "It's about time."

I turned around in surprise and found Adrian Ivashkov watching me. He had on khakis and a loose shirt and—in a surprisingly casual style for him—wore no shoes. Wind ruffled his brown hair, and he kept his hands stuffed in his pockets as he regarded me with that trademark smirk of his.

"Still got your protection," he added.

Frowning, I thought for a moment he was staring at my chest. Then I realized his eyes were on my stomach. I had on jeans and a bikini top, and once again, the little blue eye pendant dangled from my belly-button. The chotki was on my wrist.

"And you're in the sun again," I said. "So I suppose it's your dream."

"It's our dream."

I wiggled my toes in the sand. "How can two people share a dream?"

"People share dreams all the time, Rose."

I looked up at him with a frown. "I need to know what you mean. About there being darkness around me. What does it mean?"

"Honestly, I don't know. Everyone has light around them, except for you. You have shadows. You take them from Lissa."

My confusion grew. "I don't understand."

"I can't get into it right now," he told me. "That's not why I'm here."

"You're here for a reason?" I asked, my eyes wandering to the blue-gray water. It was hypnotic. "You aren't just . . . here to be here?"

He stepped forward and caught my hand, forcing me to look up at him. All amusement was gone. He was dead serious. "Where are you?"

"Here," I said, puzzled. "Just like you."

Adrian shook his head. "No, that's not what I mean. In the real world. Where are you?"

The real world? Around us, the beach suddenly blurred, like a film going out of focus. Moments later, everything steadied itself. I racked my brain. The real world. Images came to me. Chairs. Guards. Flex-cuffs.

"In a basement . . ." I said slowly. Alarm suddenly shattered the beauty of the moment as everything came back to me. "Oh God, Adrian. You've got to help Mia and Christian. I can't—"

Adrian's grip on my hand tightened. "Where?" The world shimmered again, and this time it didn't refocus. He swore. "Where are you, Rose?"

The world began to disintegrate. Adrian began to disintegrate.

"A basement. In a house. In—"

He was gone. I woke up. The sound of the room's door opening startled me back to reality.

Isaiah swept in with Elena in tow. I had to fight a sneer when I saw her. He was arrogant and mean and all-around evil. But he was that way because he was a leader. He had the strength and power to back up his cruelty—even if I didn't like it. But Elena? She was a lackey. She threatened us and made snide comments, but most of her ability to do so came from being his sidekick. She was a total suck-up.

"Hello, children," he said. "How are we doing today?"

Sullen glares answered him.

He strolled over to Mia and Christian, hands folded behind his back. “Any changes of heart since my last visit? You’re taking an awfully long time, and it’s upsetting Elena. She’s very hungry, you see, but—I suspect—not as hungry as you two.”

Christian narrowed his eyes. “Fuck off,” he said through gritted teeth.

Elena snarled and lunged forward. “Don’t you dare—”

Isaiah waved her off. “Leave him alone. It just means we wait a little longer, and really, it’s an entertaining wait.”

Elena’s eyes shot daggers at Christian.

“Honestly,” continued Isaiah, watching Christian, “I can’t decide which I want more: to kill you or have you join us. Either option offers its own amusements.”

“Don’t you get tired of hearing yourself talk?” asked Christian.

Isaiah considered. “No. Not really. And I don’t get tired of *this*, either.”

He turned around and walked toward Eddie. Poor Eddie could barely sit upright in his chair anymore after all the feedings he’d gone through. Worse, Isaiah didn’t even need to use compulsion. Eddie’s face simply lit up with a stupid grin, eager for the next bite. He was as addicted as a feeder.

Anger and disgust flooded through me.

“Damn it!” I yelled. “Leave him alone!”

Isaiah glanced back at me. “Be silent, girl. I don’t find you nearly as amusing as I do Mr. Ozera.”

“Yeah?” I snarled. “If I piss you off so much, then use me to prove your stupid point. Bite me instead. Put me in my place, and show me what a badass you are.”

“No!” exclaimed Mason. “Use me.”

Isaiah rolled his eyes. “Good God. What a noble lot. You’re all Spartacus, aren’t you?”

He strolled away from Eddie and put a finger under Mason’s chin, tilting his head up. “But you,” Isaiah said, “don’t really mean it. You only offer because of *her*.” He released Mason and walked in front of me, staring down with those black, black eyes. “And you . . . I didn’t really believe you at first either. But now?” He knelt down so that he was at my height. I refused to look away from his eyes, even though I knew that put me at risk of compulsion. “I think you really mean it. And it’s not all nobility, either. You *do* want it. You really have been bitten before.” His voice was magical. Hypnotic. He wasn’t using compulsion, exactly, but he definitely had an unnatural charisma surrounding him. Like Lissa and Adrian. I hung on his every word. “Lots of times, I’d guess,” he added.

He leaned toward me, breath hot against my neck. Somewhere beyond him, I could hear Mason shouting something, but all of my focus was on how close Isaiah’s teeth were to my skin. In the last few months, I’d only been bitten once—and that was when Lissa had had an emergency. Before then, she’d bitten me at least twice a week for two years, and I had only recently come to realize how addicted to that I’d been. There is nothing—*nothing*—in the world like a Moroi bite, like the flood of bliss it sends into you. Of course, by all accounts, Strigoi bites were even more powerful. . . .

I swallowed, suddenly aware of my own heavy breathing and racing heart. Isaiah gave a low chuckle.

“Yes. You’re a blood whore in the making. Unfortunate for you—because I’m

not going to give you what you want."

He backed away, and I slumped forward in my chair. Without further delay, he returned to Eddie and drank. I couldn't watch, but it was because of envy this time, not disgust. Longing burned inside of me. I ached for that bite, ached for it with every nerve in my body.

When Isaiah finished, he started to leave the room, then paused. He directed his words at Mia and Christian. "Don't delay," he warned. "Seize your opportunity to be saved." He tilted his head toward me. "You even have a willing victim."

He left. Across the room, Christian met my eyes. Somehow, his face looked even gaunter than it had a couple of hours ago. Hunger burned in his gaze, and I knew I wore the complementary one: a desire to sate that hunger. God. We were so screwed. I think Christian realized it at the same time. His lips twisted into a bitter smile.

"You never looked so good, Rose," he managed, just before the guards told him to shut up.

I dozed a little throughout the day, but Adrian didn't return to my dreams. Instead, while hovering just at the edge of consciousness, I found myself slipping into familiar territory: Lissa's head. After all the weirdness of these last two days, being in her mind felt like a homecoming.

She was in one of the lodge's banquet rooms, only it was empty. She sat on the floor of the far side of it, trying to stay inconspicuous. Nervousness filled her. She was waiting for something—or rather, someone. A few minutes later, Adrian slipped in.

"Cousin," he said by way of greeting. He sat down beside her and drew his knees up, unconcerned about his expensive dress pants. "Sorry I'm late."

"It's okay," she said.

"You didn't know I was here until you saw me, did you?"

She shook her head, disappointed. I felt more confused than ever.

"And sitting with me . . . you can't really notice anything?"

"No."

He shrugged. "Well. Hopefully it'll come soon."

"How does it look for you?" she asked, burning with curiosity.

"Do you know what auras are?"

"They're like . . . bands of light around people, right? Some New Age thing?"

"Something like that. Everyone has a sort of spiritual energy that radiates out from them. Well, almost everyone." His hesitation made me wonder if he was thinking of me and the darkness I allegedly walked in. "Based on the color and appearance, you can tell a lot about a person . . . well, if anyone could actually *see* auras, that is."

"And you can," she said. "And you can tell I use spirit from my aura?"

"Yours is mostly gold. Like mine. It'll shift with other colors depending on the situation, but the gold always stays."

"How many other people out there like us do you know?"

"Not many. I just see them every once in a while. They kind of keep to themselves. You're the first I've actually ever talked to. I didn't even know it was called 'spirit.' Wish I'd known about this when I didn't specialize. I just figured I was some kind of freak."

Lissa held up her arm and stared, willing herself to see the light shining around

it. Nothing. She sighed and let the arm drop.

And that's when I got it.

Adrian was a spirit user too. That was why he'd been so curious about Lissa, why he'd wanted to talk to her and ask about the bond and her specialization. It also explained a lot of other things—like that charisma I couldn't seem to escape when I was near him. He'd used compulsion that day Lissa and I had been in his room—that was how he'd forced Dimitri to release him.

"So, they finally let you go?" Adrian asked her.

"Yeah. They finally decided I really didn't know anything."

"Good," he said. He frowned, and I realized he was sober for a change. "And you're *sure* you don't?"

"I already told you that. I can't make the bond work that way."

"Hmm. Well. You've got to."

She glared. "What, you think I'm holding back? If I could find her, I would!"

"I know, but to have it at all, you must have a strong connection. Use that to talk to her in her dreams. I tried, but I can't hang on long enough to—"

"What did you say?" exclaimed Lissa. "Talk to her in her *dreams*?"

Now he looked puzzled. "Sure. Don't you know how to do that?"

"No! Are you kidding? How is that even possible?"

My dreams . . .

I remembered Lissa talking about unexplained Moroi phenomena, how there might be spirit powers out there beyond healing, things no one even knew about yet. It would appear that Adrian being in my dreams was no coincidence. He'd managed to get inside my head, maybe in a way similar to how I saw Lissa's mind. The thought made me uneasy. Lissa could barely even grasp it.

He ran a hand through his hair and tipped his head back, staring at the crystal chandelier above as he pondered. "Okay. So. You don't see auras, and you don't talk to people in dreams. What *do* you do?"

"I . . . I can heal people. Animals. Plants, too. I can bring dead things back to life."

"Really?" He looked impressed. "Okay. You get credit for that. What else?"

"Um, I can use compulsion."

"We can all do that."

"No, I can *really* do it. It's not hard. I can make people do anything I want—even bad things."

"So can I." His eyes lit up. "I wonder what would happen if you tried to use it on me. . . ."

She hesitated and absentmindedly ran her fingers over the textured red carpet. "Well . . . I can't."

"You just said you could."

"I can—just not right now. I take this prescription . . . for depression and other stuff . . . and it cuts me off from the magic."

He threw his arms up in the air. "How can I teach you to walk through dreams then? How else are we going to find Rose?"

"Look," she said angrily, "I don't *want* to take the meds. But when I was off them . . . I did really crazy stuff. Dangerous stuff. That's what spirit does to you."

"I don't take anything. I'm okay," he said.

No, he wasn't, I realized. Lissa realized it too.

“You got really weird that day when Dimitri was in your room,” she pointed out. “You started rambling, and you didn’t make any sense.”

“Oh, that? Yeah . . . it happens now and then. But seriously, not often. Once a month, if that.” He sounded sincere.

Lissa stared at him, suddenly reevaluating everything. What if Adrian could do it? What if he could use spirit without pills *and* without any harmful side effects? It would be everything she had been hoping for. Besides, she wasn’t even sure if the pills would keep working anymore. . . .

He smiled, guessing what she was thinking.

“What do you say, cousin?” he asked. He didn’t need to use compulsion. His offer was plenty tempting in its own right. “I can teach you everything I know if you’re able to touch the magic. It’ll take a while for the pills to get out of your system, but once they do . . .”

TWENTY-ONE

THIS WAS SO NOT WHAT I needed right now. I could have handled anything else Adrian did. Hitting on her, getting her to smoke his ridiculous cigarettes whatever. But not this. Lissa quitting those pills was exactly what I'd wanted to avoid.

Reluctantly, I pulled out of her head and returned to my own grim situation. I would have liked to see what further developed with Adrian and Lissa, but watching them would do no good. Okay. I *really* needed a plan now. I needed action. I needed to get us out of here. But, glancing around me, I found myself no closer to escape than I had been earlier, and I spent the next few hours brooding and speculating.

We had three guards today. They looked a little bored but not enough to slack off. Nearby, Eddie appeared unconscious, and Mason stared blankly at the floor. Across the room, Christian glared at nothing in particular, and I think Mia was sleeping. Painfully aware of how dry my throat was, I almost laughed in recalling how I'd told her water magic was useless. It might not do much in a fight, but I would have given anything for her to summon up some—

Magic.

Why hadn't I thought of this before? We weren't helpless. Not entirely.

A plan slowly coalesced in my mind—a plan that was probably insane but was also the best we had. My heart thudded with anticipation, and I immediately schooled my features to calmness before the guards noticed my sudden insight. On the opposite side of the room, Christian was watching me. He'd seen the brief flare of excitement and realized I'd thought of something. He watched me curiously, as ready for action as I was.

God. How could we pull this off? I needed his help, but I had no real way of letting him know what I had in mind. In fact, I wasn't even sure if he could help me at all—he was pretty weak.

I held his gaze, willing him to understand that something was going to happen. There was confusion on his face, but it was paired with determination. After making sure none of the guards were looking directly at me, I shifted slightly, giving a small tug at my wrists. I glanced behind me as much as I could, then met Christian's eyes again. He frowned, and I repeated the gesture.

"Hey," I said loudly. Mia and Mason both jerked in surprise. "Are you guys really going to keep starving us? Can't we at least have some water or something?"

“Shut up,” said one of the guards. It was a pretty standard answer whenever any of us spoke.

“Come on.” I used my best bitchy voice. “Not even like a sip of something? My throat’s *burning*. Practically on fire.” My gaze flicked to Christian as I said those last few words, then returned to the guard who’d spoken.

As expected, he rose from his seat and lurched toward me. “Do *not* make me repeat myself,” he growled. I didn’t know if he’d really do anything violent, but I had no interest in pushing it just yet. Besides, I’d accomplished my goal. If Christian couldn’t take the hint, there was nothing else to be done for it. Hoping I looked afraid, I shut up.

The guard returned to his seat, and after a while, he stopped watching me. I looked at Christian again and gave the wrist tug. *Come on, come on*, I thought. *Put it together, Christian.*

His eyebrows suddenly shot up, and he stared at me in amazement. Well. He’d apparently figured out something. I just hoped it was what I’d wanted. His look turned questioning, as though asking if I was really serious. I nodded emphatically. He frowned in thought for a few moments and then took a deep, steadying breath.

“All right,” he said. Everyone jumped again.

“Shut up,” said one of the guards automatically. He sounded weary.

“No,” said Christian. “I’m ready. Ready to drink.”

Everyone in the room froze for the space of a few heartbeats, including me. This wasn’t exactly what I’d had in mind.

The guards’ leader stood up. “Do *not* screw around with us.”

“I’m not,” said Christian. He had a feverish, desperate look on his face that I didn’t think was entirely faked. “I’m tired of this. I want to get out of here, and I don’t want to die. I’ll drink—and I want *her*.” He nodded toward me. Mia squeaked in alarm. Mason called Christian something that would have earned him a detention back at school.

This *definitely* wasn’t what I’d had in mind.

The other two guards looked to their leader questioningly. “Should we get Isaiah?” asked one of them.

“I don’t think he’s here,” said the leader. He studied Christian for a few seconds and then made a decision. “And I don’t want to bother him anyway if this is a joke. Let him go, and we’ll see.”

One of the men produced a pair of sharp pliers. He moved behind Christian and leaned down. I heard the sound of plastic popping as the flex-cuffs gave way. Grabbing a hold of Christian’s arm, the guard jerked him upright and led him over to me.

“Christian,” exclaimed Mason, fury filling his voice. He struggled against his constraints, shaking his chair a little. “Are you out of your mind? Don’t let them do this!”

“You guys have to die, but I don’t,” snapped Christian, tossing his black hair out of his eyes. “There’s no other way out of this.”

I didn’t really know what was going on now, but I was pretty sure I should be showing a lot more emotion if I was about to die. Two guards flanked Christian on either side, watching warily as he leaned toward me.

“Christian,” I whispered, surprised at how easy it was to sound afraid. “Don’t

do this."

His lips twisted into one of the bitter smiles he produced so well. "You and I have never liked each other, Rose. If I've got to kill someone, it might as well be you." His words were icy, precise. Believable. "Besides, I thought you wanted this."

"Not *this*. Please, don't—"

One of the guards shoved Christian. "Get it over with, or get back to your chair."

Still wearing that dark smile, Christian shrugged. "Sorry, Rose. You're going to die anyway. Why not do it for a good cause?" He brought his face down to my neck. "This is probably going to hurt," he added.

I actually doubted it would . . . if he was really going to do it. Because he wasn't . . . right? I shifted uneasily. By all accounts, if you got all your blood sucked out of you, you also got enough endorphins pumped in during the process to dull most of the pain. It was like going to sleep. Of course, that was all speculation. People who died from vampire bites didn't really come back to report on the experience.

Christian nuzzled my neck, moving his face under my hair so that it partially obscured him. His lips brushed my skin, every bit as soft as I recalled from when he and Lissa kissed. A moment later, the points of his fangs touched my skin.

And then I felt pain. Real pain.

But it wasn't coming from the bite. His teeth only pressed against my skin; they didn't break it. His tongue moved against my neck in a lapping motion, but there was no blood to suck. If anything, it was more like some kind of weird, twisted kiss.

No, the pain came from my wrists. A burning pain. Christian was using his magic to channel heat into my flex-cuffs, just as I had wanted him to. He'd understood my message. The plastic grew hotter and hotter as he continued his barely there drinking. Anyone who'd been looking closely would have been able to tell he was half-faking it, but too much of my hair was blocking the guards' view.

I knew plastic was hard to melt, but only now did I really, really understand what that meant. The temperatures required to do any damage were off the charts. It was like plunging my hands into lava. The flex-cuffs seared my skin, hot and terrible. I squirmed, hoping I could relieve the pain. I couldn't. What I did notice, however, was that the cuffs gave a little when I moved. They were getting softer. Okay. That was something. I just had to hold out a little longer. Desperately, I tried to focus on Christian's bite and distract myself. It worked for about five seconds. He wasn't giving me much in the way of endorphins, certainly not enough to combat that increasingly horrible pain. I whimpered, probably making myself more convincing.

"I can't believe it," muttered one of the guards. "He's actually doing it." Beyond them, I thought I heard the sound of Mia crying.

The cuffs' burning increased. I'd never felt anything so painful in my life, and I'd been through a lot. Passing out was rapidly becoming a very real possibility.

"Hey," the guard suddenly said. "What's that smell?"

That smell was melting plastic. Or maybe my melting flesh. Honestly, it didn't matter because the next time I moved my wrists, they broke through the gooey,

scalding cuffs.

I had ten seconds of surprise, and I used them. I leapt out of my chair, pushing Christian backward in the process. He'd had a guard on either side of him, and one still held the pliers. In a single motion, I grabbed the pliers from the guy and plunged them into his cheek. He gave some kind of gurgled scream, but I didn't wait to see what happened. My window of surprise was closing, and I couldn't waste time. As soon as I let go of the pliers, I punched the second guy. My kicks were stronger than my punches as a general rule, but I still hit him hard enough to startle him and make him stagger.

By then, the guards' leader was in action. As I'd feared, he still had a gun, and he went for it. "Don't move!" he yelled, aiming at me.

I froze. The guard I'd punched came forward and grabbed my arm. Nearby, the guy I'd stabbed was moaning on the floor. Still training the gun on me, the leader started to say something and then yelped in alarm. The gun glowed faintly orange and fell from his hands. Where he'd held it, the skin burned red and angry. Christian had heated the metal, I realized. Yeah. We definitely should have been using this magic thing from the start. If we got out of this, I was going to take up Tasha's cause. The Moroi anti-magic custom was so instilled in our brains that we hadn't even thought to try this sooner. It was stupid.

I turned on the guy holding me. I don't think he expected a girl my size to put up so much of a fight, plus he was still kind of stunned over what had happened to the other guy and the gun. I managed enough room to get in a kick to his stomach, a kick that would have earned me an A in my combat class. He grunted at the impact, and the motion propelled him back into the wall. In a flash, I was on him. Grabbing a fistful of his hair, I slammed his head against the ground hard enough to knock him out but not kill him.

Immediately, I sprang up, surprised the leader hadn't come after me yet. It shouldn't have taken him that long to recover from the shock of the heated gun. But when I turned around, the room was quiet. The leader lay unconscious on the ground—with a newly freed Mason hovering over him. Nearby, Christian held the pliers in one hand and the gun in the other. It had to still be hot, but Christian's power must have made him immune. He was aiming at that man I'd stabbed. The guy wasn't unconscious, merely bleeding, but, like I had, he froze beneath that barrel.

"Holy shit," I muttered, taking in the scene. Staggering over to Christian, I held out my hand. "Give me that before you hurt somebody."

I expected a biting remark, but he simply handed the gun over with shaking hands. I shoved it into my belt. Studying him further, I saw how pale he was. He looked like he could collapse at any moment. He'd done some pretty major magic for someone who'd been starved for two days.

"Mase, get the cuffs," I said. Without turning his back on the rest of us, Mason took a few steps back toward the box where our captors had kept their stash of flex-cuffs. He pulled out three strips of plastic and then something else. With a questioning glance at me, he held up a roll of duct tape.

"Perfect," I said.

We bound our captors to the chairs. One had remained conscious, but we knocked him out too and then put duct tape over all their mouths. They'd eventually come to, and I didn't want them making any noise.

After releasing Mia and Eddie, the five of us huddled together and planned our next move. Christian and Eddie could barely stand, but at least Christian was aware of his surroundings. Mia's face was streaked with tears, but I suspected she'd be able to take orders. That left Mason and me as the most functional in the group.

"That guy's watch says it's morning," he said. "All we've got to do is get outside, and they can't touch us. As long as there are no more humans, at least."

"They said Isaiah was gone," said Mia in a small voice. "We should just be able to leave, right?"

"Those men haven't left in hours," I said. "They could be wrong. We can't do anything stupid."

Carefully, Mason opened the door to our room and peered out into the empty hallway. "Think there's a way outside down here?"

"That'd make our lives easier," I muttered. I glanced back at the others. "Stay here. We're going to check out the rest of the basement."

"What if somebody comes?" exclaimed Mia.

"They won't," I assured her. I was actually pretty sure there was no one else in the basement; they would have come running with all that racket. And if anyone tried to come down the stairs, we would hear them first.

Still, Mason and I moved cautiously as we scouted around the basement, watching each other's backs and checking around corners. It was every bit the rat's maze I remembered from our initial capture. Twisted hallways and lots of rooms. One by one, we opened each door. Every room was empty, save for the occasional chair or two. I shuddered, thinking that all of these were probably used as prisons, just as ours had been.

"Not a goddamned window in this whole place," I muttered when we'd finished our sweep. "We've got to go upstairs."

We headed back toward our room, but before we got there, Mason caught hold of my hand. "Rose . . ."

I stopped and looked up at him. "Yeah?"

His blues eyes—more serious than I'd ever seen them— looked down at me regretfully. "I really screwed things up."

I thought about all the events that had led to this. "*We* screwed things up, Mason."

He sighed. "I hope . . . I hope when this is all done, we can sit down and talk and figure things out. I shouldn't have gotten mad at you."

I wanted to tell him that that wasn't going to happen, that when he'd disappeared, I'd actually been on my way to tell him things wouldn't be better between us. Since this didn't seem like the right time or place to bring up a breakup, I lied.

I squeezed his hand. "I hope so too."

He smiled, and we returned to the others.

"All right," I told them. "Here's how it's going to be."

We quickly hashed out a plan and then crept up the stairs. I led, followed by Mia as she tried to support a reluctant Christian. Mason brought up the rear, practically dragging Eddie.

"I should be first," Mason murmured as we stood at the top of the stairs.

"You aren't," I snapped back, resting my hand on the doorknob.

“Yeah, but if something happens—”

“Mason,” I interrupted. I stared at him hard, and suddenly, I had a brief flash of my mother that day when the Drozdov attack had broken. Calm and controlled, even in the wake of something so horrible. They’d needed a leader, just like this group did now, and I tried as hard as I could to channel her. “If something happens, you get them out of here. Run fast and run far. Do not come back without a herd of guardians.”

“You’ll be the one who gets attacked first! What am I supposed to do?” he hissed. “Leave you?”

“Yes. You forget about me if you can get them out.”

“Rose, I’m not going to—”

“Mason.” I again envisioned my mother, fighting for that strength and power to lead others. “Can you do this or not?”

We stared at each other for several heavy moments while the others held their breaths.

“I can do this,” he said stiffly. I nodded and turned back around.

The basement door squeaked when I opened it, and I grimaced at the sound. Scarcely daring to breathe, I stood perfectly still at the top of the stairs, waiting and listening. The house and its eccentric decorating looked the same as when we’d been brought in. Dark blinds covered all of the windows, but along the edges, I could see bright light peeping in. Sunshine had never tasted so sweet as it did at that moment. Getting to it meant freedom.

There were no sounds, no movements. Looking around, I tried to remember where the front door was. It was on the other side of the house—really not far in the grand scheme of things but a gaping chasm at the moment.

“Scout with me,” I whispered to Mason, hoping to make him feel better about bringing up the rear.

He let Eddie lean on Mia for a moment and stepped forward with me to do a quick sweep of the main living area. Nothing. The path was clear from here to the front door. I exhaled in relief. Mason took hold of Eddie again, and we moved forward, all of us tense and nervous. God. We were going to do this, I realized. We were really going to do this. I couldn’t believe how lucky we’d gotten. We’d been so close to disaster—and had just barely made it through. It was one of those moments that made you appreciate your life and want to turn things around. A second chance you swear you won’t let go to waste. A realization that —

I heard them move almost at the same time I saw them step in front of us. It was like a magician conjured Isaiah and Elena out of thin air. Only, I knew there was no magic involved this time. Strigoi just moved that quickly. They must have been in one of the other main floor rooms that we’d assumed were empty—we hadn’t wanted to waste the extra time looking. I raged at myself internally for not having checked out every inch of the whole floor. Somewhere, in the back of my memory, I heard myself taunting my mother in Stan’s class: *“It seems to me like you guys messed up. Why didn’t you scope out the place and make sure it was clear of Strigoi in the first place? Seems like you could have saved yourself a lot of trouble.”*

Karma’s a real bitch.

“Children, children,” crooned Isaiah. “This isn’t how the game works. You’re breaking the rules.” A cruel smile played over his lips. He found us amusing, no

real threat at all. Honestly? He was right.

"Fast and far, Mason," I said in low voice, never taking my eyes off the Strigoi.

"My, my . . . if looks could kill . . ." Isaiah arched his eyebrows as something occurred to him. "Are you thinking you can take us both on by yourself?" He chuckled. Elena chuckled. I gritted my teeth.

No, I didn't think I could take them both on. In fact, I was pretty sure I was going to die. But I was also pretty sure I could provide one hell of a distraction first.

I lunged toward Isaiah but pulled the gun on Elena. You could get a jump on human guards—but not on Strigoi. They saw me coming practically before I even moved. They didn't expect me to have a gun, though. And while Isaiah blocked my attacking body with almost no effort whatsoever, I still managed to get a shot off at Elena before he seized my arms and restrained me. The gun's report rang loud in my ears, and she screamed in pain and surprise. I'd aimed for her stomach but had been jostled into hitting her thigh. Not that it mattered. Neither spot would kill her, but the stomach would have hurt a lot more.

Isaiah held my wrists so hard, I thought he'd break the bones. I dropped the gun. It hit the floor, bounced, and slid toward the door. Elena shrieked in rage and clawed at me. Isaiah told her to control herself and pushed me out of reach. All the while, I flailed as much as possible, not so much to escape as to make a nuisance of myself.

And then: the sweetest of sounds.

The front door opening.

Mason had taken advantage of my distraction. He'd left Eddie with Mia and sprinted around me and the grappling Strigoi to open the door. Isaiah turned with that lightning-fast speed of his—and screamed as sunlight poured over him. But even though he was suffering, his reflexes were still fast. He jerked himself out of the patch of light into the living room, dragging Elena and me with him—her by the arm and me by my neck.

"Get them out!" I yelled.

"Isaiah—" began Elena, breaking out of his grip.

He shoved me to the floor and spun around, staring at his escaping victims. I gasped for breath now that his grip on my throat was gone and peered back at the door through the tangle of my hair. I was just in time to see Mason drag Eddie over the threshold, out into the safety of the light. Mia and Christian were already gone. I nearly wept in relief.

Isaiah turned back on me with all the fury of a storm, his eyes black and terrible as he loomed over me from his great height. His face, which had always been scary, became something almost beyond comprehension. "Monstrous" didn't even begin to cover it.

He jerked me up by my hair. I cried out at the pain, and he brought his head down so that our faces were pressed up to one another's.

"You want a bite, girl?" he demanded. "You want to be a blood whore? Well, we can arrange that. In every sense of the word. And it will *not* be sweet. And it will *not* be numbing. It will be painful—compulsion works both ways, you know, and I will make sure you believe you are suffering the worst pain of your life. And I will also make sure your death takes a very, very long time. You will scream. You will cry. You will beg me to end it all and let you die—"

“Isaiah,” cried Elena in exasperation. “Just kill her already. If you’d done it sooner like I said, none of this would have happened.”

He kept his grip on me but flicked his eyes toward her. “Do not interrupt me.”

“You’re being melodramatic,” she continued. Yeah, she really was whiny. I never would have thought a Strigoi could do that. It was almost comical. “And wasteful.”

“Do not talk back to me, either,” he said.

“I’m *hungry*. I’m just saying you should—”

“Let her go, or I’ll kill you.”

We all turned at the new voice, a voice dark and angry. Mason stood in the doorway, framed in light, holding my dropped gun. Isaiah studied him for a few moments.

“Sure,” Isaiah finally said. He sounded bored. “Try it.”

Mason didn’t hesitate. He fired and kept firing until he’d emptied the entire clip into Isaiah’s chest. Each bullet made the Strigoi flinch a little, but otherwise, he kept standing and holding on to me. This was what it meant to be an old and powerful Strigoi, I realized. A bullet in the thigh hurt a young vampire like Elena. But for Isaiah? Getting shot in the chest multiple times was simply a nuisance.

Mason realized this too, and his features hardened as he threw down the gun.

“Get out!” I screamed. He was still in the sun, still safe.

But he didn’t listen to me. He ran toward us, out of his protective light. I redoubled my struggles, hoping I’d pull Isaiah’s attention away from Mason. I didn’t. Isaiah shoved me into Elena before Mason was halfway to us. Swiftly, Isaiah blocked and seized hold of Mason, exactly as he’d done to me earlier.

Only, unlike with me, Isaiah didn’t restrain Mason’s arms. He didn’t jerk Mason upright by the hair or make long, rambling threats about an agonizing death. Isaiah simply stopped the attack, grabbed Mason’s head with both hands, and gave a quick twist. There was a sickening crack. Mason’s eyes went wide. Then they went blank.

With an impatient sigh, Isaiah released his hold and tossed Mason’s limp body over toward where Elena held me. It landed before us. My vision swam as nausea and dizziness wrapped around me.

“There,” Isaiah said to Elena. “See if that’ll tide you over. And save some for me.”

TWENTY-TWO

HORROR AND SHOCK CONSUMED ME, so much so that I thought my soul would shrivel, that the world would end right then and there—because surely, *surely* it couldn't keep going on after this. No one could keep going on after this. I wanted to shriek my pain to the universe. I wanted to cry until I melted. I wanted to sink down beside Mason and die with him.

Elena released me, apparently deciding I posed no danger positioned as I was between her and Isaiah. She turned toward Mason's body.

And I stopped feeling. I simply acted.

"Don't. Touch. Him." I didn't recognize my own voice.

She rolled her eyes. "Good grief, you're annoying. I'm started to see Isaiah's point—you *do* need to suffer before dying." Turning away, she knelt down to the floor and flipped Mason over onto his back.

"Don't touch him!" I screamed. I shoved her with little effect. She shoved back, nearly knocking me over. It was all I could do to steady my feet and stay upright.

Isaiah looked on with amused interest; then his gaze fell to the floor. Lissa's chotki had fallen out of my coat pocket. He picked it up. Strigoi could touch holy objects—the stories about them fearing crosses weren't true. They just couldn't enter holy ground. He flipped the cross over and ran his fingers over the etched dragon.

"Ah, the Dragomirs," he mused. "I'd forgotten about them. Easy to. There's what, one? Two of them left? Barely worth remembering." Those horrible red eyes focused on me. "Do you know any of them? I'll have to see to them one of these days. It won't be very hard to—"

Suddenly, I heard an explosion. The aquarium burst apart as water shot out of it, shattering the glass. Pieces of it flew toward me, but I barely noticed. The water coalesced in the air, forming a lopsided sphere. It began to float. Toward Isaiah. I felt my jaw drop as I stared at it.

He watched it too, more puzzled than scared. At least until it wrapped around his face and started suffocating him.

Much like the bullets, suffocation wouldn't kill him. But it could cause him a hell of a lot of discomfort.

His hands flew to his face, desperately trying to "pry" the water away. It was no use. His fingers simply slipped through. Elena forgot about Mason and jumped to her feet.

"What is it?" she shrieked. She shook him in an equally useless effort to free

him. “What’s happening?”

Again, I didn’t feel. I acted. My hand closed around a large piece of glass from the broken aquarium. It was jagged and sharp, cutting into my hand.

Sprinting forward, I plunged the shard into Isaiah’s chest, aiming for the heart I’d worked so hard to find in practice. Isaiah emitted a strangled scream through the water and collapsed to the floor. His eyes rolled back in his head as he blacked out from the pain.

Elena stared, as shocked as I’d been when Isaiah had killed Mason. Isaiah wasn’t dead, of course, but he was temporarily down for the count. Her face clearly showed she hadn’t thought that was possible.

The smart thing at that point would have been to run toward the door and the sun’s safety. Instead, I ran in the opposite direction, toward the fireplace. I grabbed one of the antique swords and turned back toward Elena. I didn’t have far to go, because she’d recovered herself and was heading toward me.

Snarling with rage, she tried to grab me. I had never trained with a sword, but I had been taught to fight with any makeshift weapon I could find. I used the sword to keep distance between us, my motions clumsy but effective for the time being.

White fangs flashed in her mouth. “I am going to make you—”

“Suffer, pay, regret I was ever born?” I suggested.

I remembered fighting with my mom, how I’d been on the defensive the whole time. That wouldn’t work this time. I had to attack. Jabbing forward, I tried to land a blow on Elena. No luck. She anticipated my every move.

Suddenly, from behind her, Isaiah groaned as he started to come around. She glanced back, the smallest of motions that let me swipe the sword across her chest. It cut the fabric of her shirt and grazed the skin, but nothing more. Still, she flinched and looked down in panic. I think the glass going through Isaiah’s heart was still fresh in her mind.

And *that* was what I really needed.

I mustered all my strength, drew back, and swung.

The sword’s blade hit the side of her neck, hard and deep. She gave a horrible, sickening cry, a shriek that made my skin crawl. She tried to move toward me. I pulled back and hit again. Her hands clutched at her throat, and her knees gave way. I struck and struck, the sword digging deeper into her neck each time. Cutting off someone’s head was harder than I’d thought it would be. The old, dull sword probably wasn’t helping.

But finally, I gained enough sense to realize she wasn’t moving. Her head lay there, detached from her body, her dead eyes looking up at me as though she couldn’t believe what had happened. That made two of us.

Someone was screaming, and for a surreal second, I thought it was still Elena. Then I lifted my eyes and looked across the room. Mia stood in the doorway, eyes bugging out and skin tinged green like she might throw up. Distantly, in the back of my mind, I realized she was the one who’d made the aquarium explode. Water magic apparently wasn’t worthless after all.

Still a bit shaken, Isaiah tried to rise to his feet. But I was on him before he could fully manage it. The sword sang out, wreaking blood and pain with each blow. I felt like an old pro now. Isaiah fell back to the floor. In my mind, I kept seeing him break Mason’s neck, and I hacked and hacked as hard as I could, as though striking fiercely enough might somehow banish the memory.

"Rose! *Rose!*"

Through my hate-filled haze, I just barely detected Mia's voice.

"Rose, he's dead!"

Slowly, shakily, I held back the next blow and looked down at his body—and the head no longer attached to it. She was right. He was dead. Very, very dead.

I looked at the rest of the room. There was blood everywhere, but the horror of it didn't really register with me. My world had slowed down, slowed down to two very simple tasks. Kill the Strigoi. Protect Mason. I couldn't process anything else.

"Rose," whispered Mia. She was trembling, her words filled with fear. She was afraid of me, not the Strigoi. "Rose, we have to go. Come on."

I dragged my eyes away from her and looked down at Isaiah's remains. After several moments, I crawled over to Mason's body, still clutching the sword.

"No," I croaked out. "I can't leave him. Other Strigoi might come...."

My eyes burned like I desperately wanted to cry. I couldn't say for sure. The bloodlust still pounded in me, violence and rage the only emotions I was capable of anymore.

"Rose, we'll come back for him. If other Strigoi are coming, we have to get out."

"No," I repeated, not even looking at her. "I'm not leaving him. I won't leave him alone." With my free hand, I stroked Mason's hair.

"Rose—"

I jerked my head up. "Get out!" I screamed at her. "Get out, and leave us alone."

She took a few steps forward, and I lifted the sword. She froze.

"Get out," I repeated. "Go find the others."

Slowly, Mia backed up toward the door. She gave me one last, desperate look before running outside.

Silence fell, and I relaxed my hold on the sword but refused to let it go. My body sagged forward, and I rested my head on Mason's chest. I became oblivious to everything: to the world around me, to time itself. Seconds could have passed. Hours could have passed. I didn't know. I didn't know anything except that I couldn't leave Mason alone. I existed in an altered state, a state that just barely kept the terror and grief at bay. I couldn't believe Mason was dead. I couldn't believe I'd just summoned death. So long as I refused to acknowledge either, I could pretend they hadn't happened.

Footsteps and voices eventually sounded, and I lifted my head up. People poured in through the door, lots of them. I couldn't really make out any of them. I didn't need to. They were threats, threats I had to keep Mason safe from. A couple of them approached me, and I leapt up, lifting the sword and holding it protectively over his body.

"Stay back," I warned. "Stay away from him."

They kept coming.

"Stay back!" I yelled. They stopped. Except for one.

"Rose," came a soft voice. "Drop the sword."

My hands shook. I swallowed. "Get away from us."

"Rose."

The voice spoke again, a voice that my soul would have known anywhere. Hesitantly, I let myself finally become aware of my surroundings, let the details

sink in. I let my eyes focus on the features of the man standing there. Dimitri's brown eyes, gentle and firm, looked down on me.

"It's okay," he said. "Everything's going to be okay. You can let go of the sword."

My hands shook even harder as I fought to hold on to the hilt. "I can't." The words hurt coming out. "I can't leave him alone. I have to protect him."

"You have," said Dimitri.

The sword fell out of my hands, landing with a loud clatter on the wooden floor. I followed, collapsing on all fours, wanting to cry but still unable to.

Dimitri's arms wrapped around me as he helped me up. Voices swarmed around us, and one by one, I recognized people I knew and trusted. He started to tug me toward the door, but I refused to move just yet. I couldn't. My hands clutched his shirt, crumpling the fabric. Still keeping one arm around me, he smoothed my hair back away from my face. I leaned my head against him, and he continued stroking my hair, murmuring something in Russian. I didn't understand a word of it, but the gentle tone soothed me.

Guardians were spreading throughout the house, examining it inch by inch. A couple of them approached us and knelt by the bodies I refused to look at.

"She did that? Both of them?"

"That sword hasn't been sharpened in years!"

A funny sound caught in my throat. Dimitri squeezed my shoulder comfortingly.

"Get her out of here, Belikov," I heard a woman say behind him, her voice familiar.

Dimitri squeezed my shoulder again. "Come on, Roza. It's time to go."

This time, I went. He guided me out of the house, holding onto me as I managed each agonizing step. My mind still refused to really process what had happened. I couldn't do much more than follow simple directions from those around me.

I eventually ended up on one of the Academy's jets. Engines roared around us as the plane lifted off. Dimitri murmured something about coming back shortly and left me alone in my seat. I stared straight ahead, studying the details of the seat in front of me.

Someone sat beside me and draped a blanket over my shoulders. I noticed then just how badly I was shivering. I tugged at the edges of the blanket.

"I'm cold," I said. "How am I so cold?"

"You're in shock," Mia answered.

I turned and looked at her, studying her blond curls and big blue eyes. Something about seeing her unleashed my memories. It all tumbled back. I squeezed my eyes shut.

"Oh God," I breathed. I opened my eyes and focused on her again. "You saved me—saved me when you blew up the fish tank. You shouldn't have done it. You shouldn't have come back."

She shrugged. "You shouldn't have gone for the sword." Fair point. "Thank you," I told her. "What you did . . . I never would have thought of that. It was brilliant."

"I don't know about that," she mused, smiling ruefully. "Water isn't much of a weapon, remember?"

I choked on a laugh, even though I really didn't find my old words that funny. Not anymore.

"Water's a great weapon," I said finally. "When we get back, we'll have to practice ways to use it."

Her face lit up. Fierceness shone out from her eyes. "I'd like that. More than anything."

"I'm sorry . . . sorry about your mom."

Mia simply nodded. "You're lucky to still have yours. You don't know how lucky."

I turned and stared at the seat again. The next words out of my mouth startled me: "I wish she was here."

"She is," said Mia, sounding surprised. "She was with the group that raided the house. Didn't you see her?"

I shook my head.

We lapsed into silence. Mia stood up and left. A minute later, someone else sat down beside me. I didn't have to see her to know who she was. I just *knew*.

"Rose," said my mother. For once in my life, she sounded unsure of herself. Scared, maybe. "Mia said you wanted to see me." I didn't answer. I didn't look at her. "What . . . what do you need?"

I didn't know what I needed. I didn't know what to do. The stinging in my eyes grew unbearable, and before I knew it, I was crying. Big, painful sobs seized my body. The tears I'd held back so long poured down my face. The fear and grief I'd refused to let myself feel finally burst free, burning in my chest. I could scarcely breathe.

My mother put her arms around me, and I buried my face in her chest, sobbing even harder.

"I know," she said softly, tightening her grip on me. "I understand."

TWENTY-THREE

THE WEATHER WARMED UP ON the day of my *molnija* ceremony. In fact, it was so warm that a lot of the snow on campus began melting, running down the sides of the Academy's stone buildings in slim, silvery streams. Winter was far from being over, so I knew everything would just freeze up again in a few days. For now, though, it felt as though the entire world was weeping.

I had walked away from the Spokane incident with minor bruises and cuts. The burns from the melting flex-cuffs were the worst of my injuries. But I was still having a hard time dealing with the death I'd caused and the death I'd seen. I'd wanted little more than to go curl up in a ball somewhere and not talk to anyone, except maybe Lissa. But on my fourth day back at the Academy, my mother had found me and told me it was time to receive my marks.

It had taken me several moments to grasp what she was talking about. Then it occurred to me that in decapitating two Strigoi, I'd earned two *molnija* tattoos. My first ones. The realization had stunned me. All my life, in considering my future career as a guardian, I'd looked forward to the marks. I'd seen them as badges of honor. But now? Mainly they were going to be reminders of something I wanted to forget.

The ceremony took place in the guardians' building, in a large room they used for meetings and banquets. It was nothing at all like the great dining room at the resort. It was efficient and practical, like the guardians were. The carpet was a bluish gray shade, low and tightly woven. The bare white walls held framed black-and-white photos of St. Vladimir's through the years. There were no other decorations or fanfare, yet the solemnity and power of the moment were palpable. All the guardians on campus—but no novices—attended. They milled around in the building's main meeting room, hanging out in clusters but not talking. When the ceremony started, they fell into orderly ranks without being told and watched me.

I sat on a stool in the corner of the room, leaning forward with my hair hanging over the front of my face. Behind me, a guardian named Lionel held a tattooist's needle to the back of my neck. I'd known him the whole time I'd been at the Academy, but I'd never realized he was trained to draw *molnija* marks.

Before he started, he had a murmured conversation with my mother and Alberta.

"She won't have a promise mark," he said. "She hasn't graduated."

"It happens," said Alberta. "She made the kills. Do the *molnijas* , and she'll get

the promise mark later."

Considering the pain I regularly put myself through, I didn't expect the tattoos to hurt as much as they did. But I bit my lip and stayed silent as Lionel made the marks. The process seemed to go on forever. When he finished, he produced a couple of mirrors, and with some maneuvering, I was able to see the back of my neck. Two tiny black marks sat there, side by side, against my reddened and sensitive skin. *Molnija* meant "lightning" in Russian, and that's what the jagged shape was meant to symbolize. Two marks. One for Isaiah, one for Elena.

Once I'd seen them, he bandaged them up and gave me some instructions about caring for them while they healed. Most of it I missed, but I figured I could ask again later. I was still kind of shocked by it all.

After that, all the gathered guardians came up to me one by one. They each gave me some sort of sign of affection—a hug, a kiss on the cheek—and kind words.

"Welcome to the ranks," said Alberta, her weathered face gentle as she pulled me into a tight embrace.

Dimitri didn't say anything when his turn came, but as always, his eyes spoke legions. Pride and tenderness filled his expression, and I swallowed back tears. He rested one hand gently on my cheek, nodded, and walked away.

When Stan—the instructor I'd fought with the most since my first day—hugged me and said, "Now you're one of us. I always knew you'd be one of the best," I thought I'd pass out.

And then when my mother came up to me, I couldn't help the tear that ran down my cheek. She wiped it away and then brushed her fingers against the back of my neck. "Don't ever forget," she told me.

Nobody said, "Congratulations," and I was glad. Death wasn't anything to get excited about.

When that was done, drinks and food were served. I walked to the buffet table and made a plate for myself of miniature feta quiches and a slice of mango cheesecake. I ate without really tasting the food and answered questions from others without even knowing what I said half the time. It was like I was a Rose robot, going through the motions of what was expected. On the back of my neck, my skin stung from the tattoos, and in my mind, I kept seeing Mason's blue eyes and Isaiah's red ones.

I felt guilty for not enjoying my big day more, but I was relieved when the group finally started dispersing. My mother walked up to me as others murmured their good-byes. Aside from her words here at the ceremony, we hadn't talked much since my breakdown on the plane. I still felt a little funny about that—and a little embarrassed as well. She'd never mentioned it, but something very small had shifted in the nature of our relationship. We weren't anywhere near being friends . . . but we weren't exactly enemies anymore either.

"Lord Szelsky is leaving soon," she told me as we stood near the building's doorway, not far from where I'd yelled for her on that first day we'd talked. "I'll be going with him."

"I know," I said. There was no question she'd leave. That was how it was. Guardians followed Moroi. They came first.

She regarded me for a few moments, her brown eyes thoughtful. For the first time in a long time, I felt like we were actually looking eye to eye, as opposed to

her looking down on me. It was about time, too, seeing as I had half a foot of height on her.

"You did well," she said at last. "Considering the circumstances. "

It was only half a compliment, but I deserved no more. I understood now the mistakes and lapses of judgment that had led to the events at Isaiah's house. Some had been my fault; some hadn't. I wished I could have changed some of my actions, but I knew she was right. I'd done the best I could in the end with the mess before me.

"Killing Strigoi wasn't as glamorous as I thought it'd be," I told her.

She gave me a sad smile. "No. It never is."

I thought then about all the marks on her neck, all the kills. I shuddered.

"Oh, hey." Eager to change the subject, I reached into my pocket and pulled out the little blue eye pendant she'd given me. "This thing you gave me. It's a *n-nazar*?" I stumbled over the word. She looked surprised.

"Yes. How'd you know?"

I didn't want to explain my dreams with Adrian. "Someone told me. It's a protection thing, right?"

A pensive look crossed her face, and then she exhaled and nodded. "Yes. It comes from an old superstition in the Middle East. . . . Some people believe that those who want to hurt you can curse you or give you 'the evil eye.' The nazar is meant to counteract the evil eye . . . and just bring protection in general to those who wear it."

I ran my fingers over the piece of glass. "Middle East . . . so, places sort of like, um, Turkey?"

My mother's lips quirked. "Places exactly like Turkey." She hesitated. "It was . . . a gift. A gift I received a long time ago . . ." Her gaze turned inward, lost in memory. "I got a lot of . . . attention from men when I was your age. Attention that seemed flattering at first but wasn't in the end. It's hard to tell the difference sometimes, between what's real affection and what's someone wanting to take advantage of you. But when you feel the real thing . . . well, you'll know."

I understood then why she was so overprotective about my reputation—she'd endangered her own when she was younger. Maybe more than that had been damaged.

I also knew why she'd given the nazar to me. My father had given it to her. I didn't think she wanted to talk anymore about it, so I didn't ask. It was enough to know that maybe, just maybe, their relationship hadn't been all about business and genes after all.

We said goodbye, and I returned to my classes. Everyone knew where I'd been that morning, and my fellow novices wanted to see my *molnija* marks. I didn't blame them. If our roles had been reversed, I would have been harassing me too.

"Come on, Rose," begged Shane Reyes. We were walking out of our morning practice, and he kept swatting my ponytail. I made a mental note to wear my hair down tomorrow. Several others followed us and echoed his requests.

"Yeah, come on. Let's see what you got for your swordsmanship! "

Their eyes shone with eagerness and excitement. I was a hero, their classmate who'd dispatched the leaders of the roving band of Strigoi that had so terrorized us over the holidays. But I met the eyes of someone standing at the back of the group, someone who looked neither eager nor excited. Eddie. Meeting my gaze,

he gave me a small, sad smile. He understood.

"Sorry, guys," I said, turning back to the others. "They have to stay bandaged. Doctor's orders."

This was met with grumbles that soon turned into questions about how I'd actually killed the Strigoi. Decapitation was one of the hardest and rarest ways to kill a vampire; it wasn't like carrying a sword was convenient. So I did my best to tell my friends what had happened, making sure to stick to the facts and not glorify the killings.

The school day couldn't end a moment too soon, and Lissa walked with me back to my dorm. She and I hadn't had the chance to talk much since everything had gone down in Spokane. I'd undergone a lot of questioning, and then there'd been Mason's funeral. Lissa had also been caught up in her own distractions with the royals leaving campus, so she'd had no more free time than me.

Being near her made me feel better. Even though I could be in her head at any time, it just wasn't the same as actually being physically around another living person who cared about you.

When we got to the door of my room, I saw a bouquet of freesias sitting on the floor near it. Sighing, I picked up the fragrant flowers without even looking at the attached card.

"What are those?" asked Lissa while I unlocked the door.

"They're from Adrian," I told her. We walked inside, and I pointed to my desk, where a few other bouquets sat. I put the freesias down beside them. "I'll be glad when he leaves campus. I don't think I can take much more of this."

She turned to me in surprise. "Oh. Um, you don't know."

I got that warning twinge through the bond that told me I wouldn't like what was about to come.

"Know what?"

"Uh, he isn't leaving. He's going to stay here for a while."

"He has to leave," I argued. To my knowledge, the only reason he'd come back at all was because of Mason's funeral, and I still wasn't sure why he'd done that, since he barely knew Mason. Maybe Adrian had just done it for show. Or maybe to keep stalking Lissa and me. "He's in college. Or maybe reform school. I don't know, but he does something."

"He's taking the semester off."

I stared.

Smiling at my shock, she nodded. "He's going to stay and work with me . . . and Ms. Carmack. All this time, he never even knew what spirit was. He just knew he hadn't specialized but that he had these weird abilities. He just kept them to himself, except for when he occasionally found another spirit user. But they didn't know any more than he did."

"I should have figured it out sooner," I mused. "There was something about being around him. . . . I always wanted to talk to him, you know? He just has this . . . charisma. Like you do. I guess it's all tied into spirit and compulsion or whatever. It makes me like him . . . even though I don't like him."

"Don't you?" she teased.

"No," I replied adamantly. "And I don't like that dream thing, either."

Her jade eyes went wide with wonder. "*That* is cool," she said. "You've always been able to tell what's going on with me, but I've never been able to

communicate with you the other way. I'm glad you guys got away when you did . . . but I wish I could have figured out the dream thing and helped find you."

"Not me," I said. "I'm glad Adrian didn't get you to go off your meds."

I hadn't found that out until a few days after being in Spokane. Lissa had apparently rejected Adrian's initial suggestion that stopping the pills would let her learn more about spirit. She had admitted to me later, however, that if Christian and I had stayed missing much longer, she might have cracked.

"How are you feeling lately?" I asked, recalling her concerns about the medication. "You still feel like the pills aren't working?"

"Mmm . . . well, it's hard to explain. I still feel closer to the magic, like maybe they aren't blocking me so much anymore. But I'm not feeling any of the other mental side effects . . . not upset or anything."

"Wow, that's great."

A beautiful smile lit her face. "I know. It makes me think there might be hope for me to learn to work the magic after all someday."

Seeing her so happy made me smile back. I hadn't liked seeing those dark feelings starting to return and was glad they'd vanished. I didn't understand the how or the why, but as long as she felt okay—

Everyone has light around them, except for you. You have shadows. You take them from Lissa.

Adrian's words slammed into my mind. Uneasily, I thought about my behavior these last couple of weeks. Some of the angry outbursts. My rebelliousness—unusual even for me. My own black coil of emotion, stirring in my chest . . .

No, I decided. There were no similarities. Lissa's dark feelings were magic-based. Mine were stress-based. Besides, I felt fine right now.

Seeing her watching me, I tried to remember where we'd left off in the conversation. "Maybe you'll eventually find a way to make it work. I mean, if Adrian could find a way to use spirit and doesn't need meds . . ."

She suddenly laughed. "You don't know, do you?"

"What?"

"That Adrian does medicate himself."

"He does? But he said—" I groaned. "Of course he does. The cigarettes. The drinking. God only knows what else."

She nodded. "Yup. He's almost always got something in his system."

"But probably not at night . . . which is why he can poke his head into my dreams."

"Man, I wish I could do that," she sighed.

"Maybe you'll learn someday. Just don't become an alcoholic in the process."

"I won't," she assured me. "But I *will* learn. None of the other spirit users could do it, Rose—well, aside from St. Vladimir. I'll learn like he did. I'm going to learn to use it—and I won't let it hurt me."

I smiled and touched her hand. I had absolute faith in her. "I know."

We talked for most of the evening. When the time came for my usual practice with Dimitri, I parted ways with her. As I walked away, I pondered something that had been bothering me. Although the attacking groups of Strigoi had had many more members, the guardians felt confident Isaiah had been their leader. That didn't mean there wouldn't be *other* threats in the future, but they felt it'd be a while before his followers regrouped.

But I couldn't help thinking about the list I'd seen in the tunnel in Spokane, the one that had listed royal families by size. And Isaiah had mentioned the Dragomirs by name. He knew they were almost gone, and he'd sounded keen on being the one to finish them. Sure, he was dead now . . . but were there other Strigoi out there with the same idea?

I shook my head. I couldn't worry about that. Not today. I still needed to recover from everything else. Soon, though. Soon I'd have to deal with this.

I didn't even know if our practice was still on but went to the locker room anyway. After changing into practice clothes, I headed down into the gym and found Dimitri in a supply room, reading one of the Western novels he loved. He looked up at my entrance. I'd seen little of him in these last few days and had figured he was busy with Tasha.

"I thought you might come by," he said, putting a book-mark between the pages.

"It's time for practice."

He shook his head. "No. No practice today. You still need to recover."

"I've got a clean bill of health. I'm good to go." I pushed as much patented Rose Hathaway bravado into my words as I could.

Dimitri wasn't falling for any of it. He gestured to the chair beside him. "Sit down, Rose."

I hesitated only a moment before complying. He moved his own chair close to mine so that we sat directly across from each other. My heart fluttered as I looked into those gorgeous dark eyes.

"No one gets over their first kill . . . kills . . . easily. Even with Strigoi . . . well, it's still technically taking a life. That's hard to come to terms with. And after everything else you went through . . ." He sighed, then reached out and caught my hand in his. His fingers were exactly like I remembered, long and powerful, calloused with years of training. "When I saw your face . . . when we found you in that house . . . you can't imagine how I felt."

I swallowed. "How . . . how did you feel?"

"Devastated . . . grief-stricken. You were alive, but the way you looked . . . I didn't think you'd ever recover. And it tore me apart to think of that happening to you so young." He squeezed my hand. "You will recover—I know that now, and I'm glad. But you aren't there. Not yet. Losing someone you care about is never easy."

My eyes dropped from his and studied the floor. "It's my fault," I said in a small voice.

"Hmm?"

"Mason. Getting killed."

I didn't have to see Dimitri's face to know compassion was filling it. "Oh, Roza. No. You made some bad decisions . . . you should have told others when you knew he was gone . . . but you can't blame yourself. You didn't kill him."

Tears brimmed in my eyes as I looked back up. "I might as well have. The whole reason he went there—it was my fault. We had a fight . . . and I told him about the Spokane thing, even though you asked me not to. . . ."

One tear leaked out of the corner of my eye. Really, I needed to learn to stop that. Just as my mother had, Dimitri delicately wiped the tear off my cheek.

"You can't blame yourself for that," he told me. "You can regret your decisions

and wish you'd done things differently, but in the end, Mason made his decisions too. That was what he chose to do. It was his decision in the end, no matter your original role." When Mason had come back for me, I realized, he'd let his feelings for me get in the way. It was what Dimitri had always feared, that if he and I had any sort of relationship, it would put us—and any Moroi we protected—in danger.

"I just wish I'd been able to . . . I don't know, do anything. ..."

Swallowing back further tears, I pulled my hands from Dimitri's and stood up before I could say something stupid.

"I should go," I said thickly. "Let me know when you want to start practice again. And thanks for . . . talking."

I started to turn; then I heard him say abruptly, "No."

I glanced back. "What?"

He held my gaze, and something warm and wonderful and powerful shot between us.

"No," he repeated. "I told her no. Tasha."

"I . . ." I shut my mouth before my jaw hit the floor. "But . . . why? That was a once-in-a-lifetime thing. You could have had a baby. And she . . . she was, you know, into you. . . ."

The ghost of a smile flickered on his face. "Yes, she was. Is. And that's why I had to say no. I couldn't return that . . . couldn't give her what she wanted. Not when . . ." He took a few steps toward me. "Not when my heart is somewhere else."

I almost started crying again. "But you seemed so into her. And you kept going on about how young I acted."

"You act young," he said, "because you *are* young. But you know things, Roza. Things people older than you don't even know. That day . . ." I knew instantly which day he referred to. The one up against the wall. "You were right, about how I fight to stay in control. No one else has ever figured that out— and it scared me. *You* scare me."

"Why? Don't you want anyone to know?"

He shrugged. "Whether they know that fact or not doesn't matter. What matters is that someone—that you—know me that well. When a person can see into your soul, it's hard. It forces you to be open. Vulnerable. It's much easier being with someone who's just more of a casual friend."

"Like Tasha."

"Tasha Ozera is an amazing woman. She's beautiful and she's brave. But she doesn't—"

"She doesn't *get* you," I finished.

He nodded. "I knew that. But I still wanted the relationship. I knew it would be easy and that she could take me away from you. I thought she could make me forget you."

I'd thought the same thing about Mason. "But she couldn't."

"Yes. And, so . . . that's a problem."

"Because it's wrong for us to be together."

"Yes."

"Because of the age difference."

"Yes."

“But more importantly because we’re going to be Lissa’s guardians and need to focus on her—not each other.”

“Yes.”

I thought about this for a moment and then looked straight into his eyes. “Well,” I said at last, “the way I see it, we aren’t Lissa’s guardians *yet*.”

I steeled myself for the next response. I knew it was going to be one of the Zen life lessons. Something about inner strength and perseverance, about how the choices we made today were templates for the future or some other nonsense.

Instead he kissed me.

Time stopped as he reached out and cupped my face between his hands. He brought his mouth down and brushed it against my lips. It was barely a kiss at first but soon increased, becoming heady and deep. When he finally pulled away, it was to kiss my forehead. He left his lips there for several seconds as his arms held me close.

I wished the kiss could have gone on forever. Breaking the embrace, he ran a few fingers through my hair and down my cheek. He stepped back toward the door.

“I’ll see you later, Roza.”

“At our next practice?” I asked. “We *are* starting those up again, right? I mean, you still have things to teach me.”

Standing in the doorway, he looked over at me and smiled. “Yes. Lots of things.”

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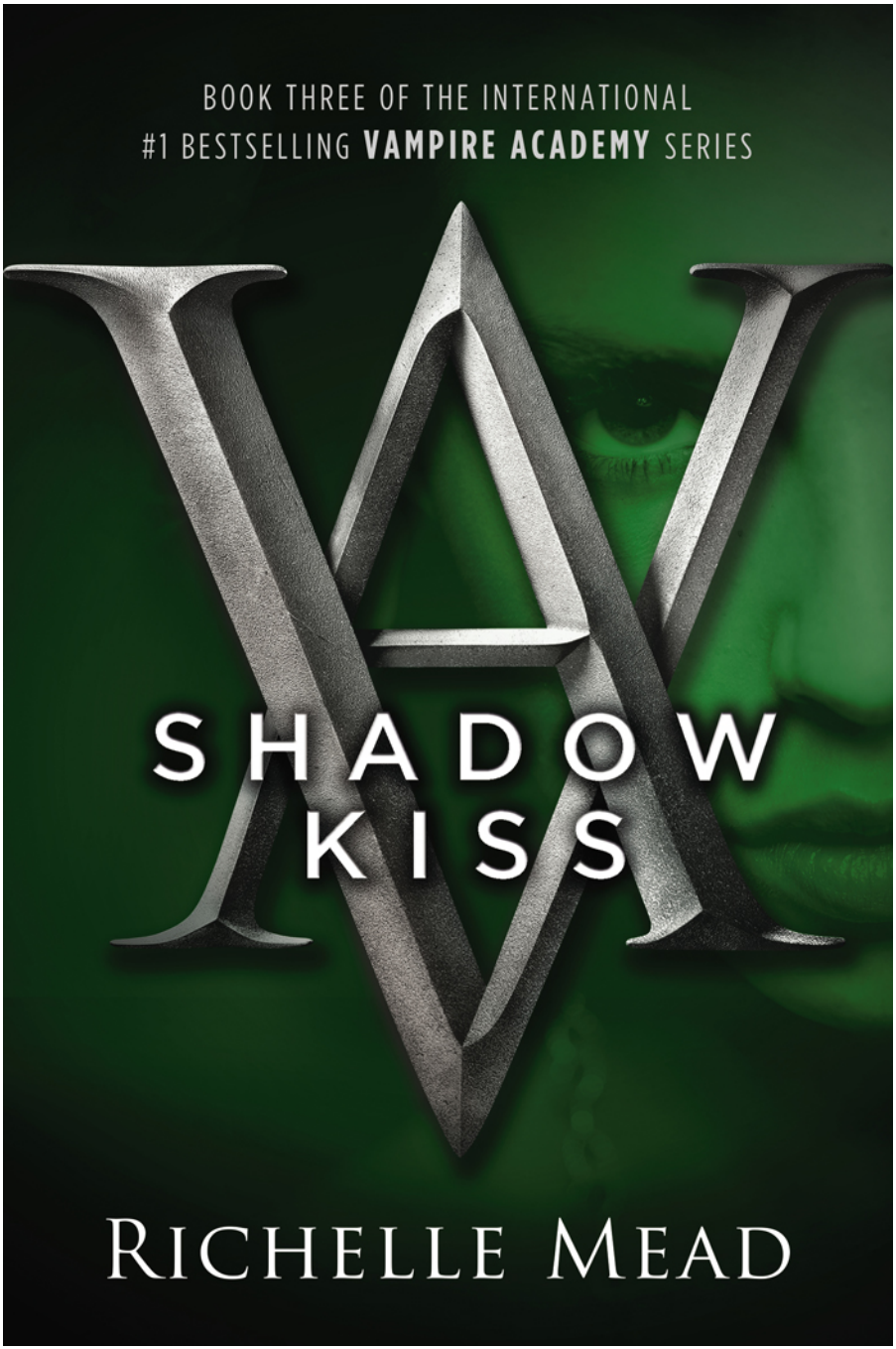
BOOK THREE OF THE INTERNATIONAL
#1 BESTSELLING VAMPIRE ACADEMY SERIES
VA
SHADOW KISS
RICHELLE MEAD

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For my nephews, Jordan and Austin

Shadow Kiss

RAZORBILL

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Version_7

VA
SHADOW KISS

RICHELLE MEAD

ONE

HIS FINGERTIPS SLID ALONG my back, applying hardly any pressure, yet sending shock waves over my flesh. Slowly, slowly, his hands moved across my skin, down the sides of my stomach to finally rest in the curves of my hips. Just below my ear, I felt his lips press against my neck, followed by another kiss just below it, then another, then another. . . .

His lips moved from my neck toward my cheek and then finally found my mouth. We kissed, wrapping ourselves closer together. My blood burned within me, and I felt more alive in that moment than I ever had. I loved him, loved Christian so much that—

Christian?

Oh no.

Some coherent part of me immediately realized what was happening—and boy, was it pissed off. The rest of me, however, was still actually living in this encounter, experiencing it as though I was the one being touched and kissed. That part of me couldn't break away. I'd merged too much with Lissa, and for all intents and purposes, this *was* happening to me.

No, I told myself sternly. *It's not real—not for you. Get out of there*.

But how could I listen to logic when every nerve of my body was being set on fire?

You aren't her. This isn't your head. Get out.

His lips. There was nothing in the world right now except his lips.

It's not him. Get out.

The kisses were the same, exactly as I remembered with *him*. . . .

No, it's not *Dimitri. Get out!*

Dimitri's name was like cold water hitting me in the face. I got out.

I sat upright in my bed, suddenly feeling smothered. I tried kicking off the

covers but mostly ended up entangling my legs even more. My heart beat hard in my chest, and I tried to take deep breaths to steady myself and return to my own reality.

Times sure had changed. A long time ago, Lissa's nightmares used to wake me from sleep. Now her sex life did. To say the two were a little different would be an understatement. I'd actually gotten the hang of blocking out her romantic interludes—at least when I was awake. This time, Lissa and Christian had (unintentionally) outsmarted me. In sleep, my defenses were down, allowing strong emotions to pass through the psychic link that connected me to my best friend. This wouldn't have been a problem if the two of them had been in bed like normal people—and by "being in bed," I mean "asleep."

"God," I muttered, sitting up and swinging my legs over the side of the bed. My voice was muffled in a yawn. Couldn't Lissa and Christian have seriously kept their hands off each other until waking hours?

Worse than being woken up, though, was the way I still felt. Sure, none of that making out had actually happened to me. It hadn't been *my* skin being touched or *my* lips being kissed. Yet my body seemed to feel the loss of it nonetheless. It had been a very long time since I'd been in that kind of situation. I ached and felt warm all over. It was idiotic, but suddenly, desperately, I wanted someone to touch me—even just to hold me. But definitely not Christian. The memory of those lips on mine flashed back through my mind, how they'd felt, and how my sleepy self had been so certain it was Dimitri kissing me.

I stood up on shaky legs, feeling restless and . . . well, sad. Sad and empty. Needing to walk off my weird mood, I put on a robe and slippers and left my room for the bathroom down the hall. I splashed cool water on my face and stared in the mirror. The reflection looking back at me had tangled hair and bloodshot eyes. I looked sleep-deprived, but I didn't want to go back to bed. I didn't want to risk falling asleep quite yet. I needed something to wake me up and shake away what I'd seen.

I left the bathroom and turned toward the stairwell, my feet light on the steps as I went downstairs. The first floor of my dorm was still and quiet. It was almost noon—the middle of the night for vampires, since they ran on a nocturnal schedule. Lurking near the edge of a doorway, I scanned the lobby. It was empty, save for the yawning Moroi man sitting at the front desk. He leafed halfheartedly through a magazine, held to consciousness only by the finest of threads. He came to the magazine's end and yawned again. Turning in his revolving chair, he tossed the magazine on a table behind him and reached for what must have been something else to read.

While his back was turned, I darted past him toward the set of double doors that opened outside. Praying the doors wouldn't squeak, I carefully opened one a crack, just enough to slip through. Once outside, I eased the door shut as gently as possible. No noise. At most, the guy would feel a draft. Feeling like a ninja, I stepped out into the light of day.

Cold wind blasted me in the face, but it was exactly what I needed. Leafless tree branches swayed in that wind, clawing at the sides of the stone dorm like fingernails. The sun peeped at me from between lead-colored clouds, further reminding me that I should be in bed and asleep. Squinting at the light, I

tugged my robe tighter and walked around the side of the building, toward a spot between it and the gym that wasn't quite so exposed to the elements. The slush on the sidewalk soaked into the cloth of my slippers, but I didn't care.

Yeah, it was a typically miserable winter day in Montana, but that was the point. The crisp air did a lot to wake me up and chase off the remnants of the virtual love scene. Plus, it kept me firmly in my own head. Focusing on the cold in my body was better than remembering what it had felt like to have Christian's hands on me. Standing there, staring off at a cluster of trees without really seeing them, I was surprised to feel a spark of anger at Lissa and Christian. It must be nice, I thought bitterly, to do whatever the hell you wanted. Lissa had often commented that she wished she could feel my mind and experiences the way I could feel hers. The truth was, she had no idea how lucky she was. She had no idea what it was like to have someone else's thoughts intruding on yours, someone else's experiences muddling yours. She didn't know what it was like to live with someone else's perfect love life when your own was nonexistent. She didn't understand what it was like to be filled with a love so strong that it made your chest ache—a love you could only feel and not express. Keeping love buried was a lot like keeping anger pent up, I'd learned. It just ate you up inside until you wanted to scream or kick something.

No, Lissa didn't understand any of that. She didn't have to. She could carry on with her own romantic affairs, with no regard for what she was doing to me.

I noticed then that I was breathing heavily again, this time with rage. The icky feeling I'd felt over Lissa and Christian's late-night hookup was gone. It had been replaced by anger and jealousy, feelings born of what I couldn't have and what came so easily to her. I tried my best to swallow those emotions back; I didn't want to feel that way toward my best friend.

"Are you sleepwalking?" a voice asked behind me.

I spun around, startled. Dimitri stood there watching me, looking both amused and curious. It would figure that while I was raging over the problems in my unfair love life, the source of those problems would be the one to find me. I hadn't heard him approach at all. So much for my ninja skills. And honestly, would it have killed me to pick up a brush before I went outside? Hastily, I ran a hand through my long hair, knowing it was a little too late. It probably looked like an animal had died on top of my head.

"I was testing dorm security," I said. "It sucks."

A hint of a smile played over his lips. The cold was really starting to seep into me now, and I couldn't help but notice how warm his long leather coat looked. I wouldn't have minded wrapping up in it.

As though reading my mind, he said, "You must be freezing. Do you want my coat?"

I shook my head, deciding not to mention that I couldn't feel my feet. "I'm fine. What are you doing out here? Are you testing security too?"

"I *am* security. This is my watch." Shifts of school guardians always patrolled the grounds while everyone else slept. Strigoi, the undead vampires who stalked living Moroi vampires like Lissa, didn't come out in sunlight, but students breaking rules—say, like, sneaking out of their dorms—were a

problem night and day.

"Well, good work," I said. "I'm glad I was able to help test your awesome skills. I should be going now."

"Rose—" Dimitri's hand caught my arm, and despite all the wind and chill and slush, a flash of heat shot through me. He released me with a start, as though he too had been burned. "What are you really doing out here?"

He was using the *stop fooling around* voice, so I gave him as truthful an answer as I could. "I had a bad dream. I wanted some air."

"And so you just rushed out. Breaking the rules didn't even cross your mind—and neither did putting on a coat."

"Yeah," I said. "That pretty much sums it up."

"Rose, Rose." This time it was his exasperated voice. "You never change. Always jumping in without thinking."

"That's not true," I protested. "I've changed a lot."

The amusement on his face suddenly faded, his expression growing troubled. He studied me for several moments. Sometimes I felt as though those eyes could see right into my soul. "You're right. You have changed."

He didn't seem very happy about the admission. He was probably thinking about what had happened almost three weeks ago, when some friends and I had gotten ourselves captured by Strigoi. It was only through sheer luck that we'd managed to escape—and not all of us had gotten out. Mason, a good friend and a guy who'd been crazy about me, had been killed, and part of me would never forgive myself for it, even though I'd killed his murderers.

It had given me a darker outlook on life. Well, it had given *everyone* here at St. Vladimir's Academy a darker outlook, but me especially. Others had begun to notice the difference in me. I didn't like to see Dimitri concerned, though, so I played off his observation with a joke.

"Well, don't worry. My birthday's coming up. As soon as I'm eighteen, I'll be an adult, right? I'm sure I'll wake up that morning and be all mature and stuff."

As I'd hoped, his frown softened into a small smile. "Yes, I'm sure. What is it, about a month?"

"Thirty-one days," I announced primly.

"Not that you're counting."

I shrugged, and he laughed.

"I suppose you've made a birthday list too. Ten pages? Single-spaced? Ranked by order of priority?" The smile was still on his face. It was one of the relaxed, genuinely amused ones that were so rare to him.

I started to make another joke, but the image of Lissa and Christian flared into my mind again. That sad and empty feeling in my stomach returned. Anything I might have wanted—new clothes, an iPod, whatever—suddenly seemed trivial. What did material things like that mean compared to the one thing I wanted most of all? God, I really had changed.

"No," I said in a small voice. "No list."

He tilted his head to better look at me, making some of his shoulder-length hair blow into his face. His hair was brown, like mine, but not nearly as dark. Mine looked black at times. He brushed the unruly strands aside, only to have them immediately blow back into his face. "I can't believe you don't want

anything. It's going to be a boring birthday."

Freedom, I thought. That was the only gift I longed for. Freedom to make my own choices. Freedom to love who I wanted.

"It doesn't matter," I said instead.

"What do you—" He stopped. He understood. He always did. It was part of why we connected like we did, in spite of the seven-year gap in our ages. We'd fallen for each other last fall when he'd been my combat instructor. As things heated up between us, we'd found we had more things to worry about than just age. We were both going to be protecting Lissa when she graduated, and we couldn't let our feelings for each other distract us when she was our priority.

Of course, that was easier said than done because I didn't think our feelings for each other were ever really going to go away. We'd both had moments of weakness, moments that led to stolen kisses or saying things we really shouldn't have. After I'd escaped the Strigoi, Dimitri had told me he loved me and had pretty much admitted he could never be with anyone else because of that. Yet, it had also become clear that we still couldn't be together either, and we had both slipped back into our old roles of keeping away from each other and pretending that our relationship was strictly professional.

In a not-so-obvious attempt to change the subject, he said, "You can deny it all you want, but I know you're freezing. Let's go inside. I'll take you in through the back."

I couldn't help feeling a little surprised. Dimitri was rarely one to avoid uncomfortable subjects. In fact, he was notorious for pushing me into conversations about topics I didn't want to deal with. But talking about our dysfunctional, star-crossed relationship? That was a place he apparently didn't want to go today. Yeah. Things were definitely changing.

"I think you're the one who's cold," I teased, as we walked around the side of the dorm where novice guardians lived. "Shouldn't you be all tough and stuff, since you're from Siberia?"

"I don't think Siberia's exactly what you imagine."

"I imagine it as an arctic wasteland," I said truthfully.

"Then it's definitely not what you imagine."

"Do you miss it?" I asked, glancing back to where he walked behind me. It was something I'd never considered before. In my mind, *everyone* would want to live in the U.S. Or, well, they at least wouldn't want to live in Siberia.

"All the time," he said, his voice a little wistful. "Sometimes I wish—"

"Belikov!"

A voice was carried on the wind from behind us. Dimitri muttered something, and then shoved me further around the corner I'd just rounded. "Stay out of sight."

I ducked down behind a bank of holly trees that flanked the building. They didn't have any berries, but the thick clusters of sharp, pointed leaves scratched where my skin was exposed. Considering the freezing temperature and possible discovery of my late-night walk, a few scratches were the least of my problems right now.

"You're not on watch," I heard Dimitri say several moments later.

"No, but I needed to talk to you." I recognized the voice. It belonged to

Alberta, captain of the Academy's guardians. "It'll just take a minute. We need to shuffle some of the watches while you're at the trial."

"I figured," he said. There was a funny, almost uncomfortable note in his voice. "It's going to put a strain on everyone else—bad timing."

"Yes, well, the queen runs on her own schedule." Alberta sounded frustrated, and I tried to figure out what was going on. "Celeste will take your watches, and she and Emil will divide up your training times."

Training times? Dimitri wouldn't be conducting any trainings next week because—Ah. That was it, I realized. The field experience. Tomorrow kicked off six weeks of hands-on practice for us novices. We'd have no classes and would get to protect Moroi night and day while the adults tested us. The "training times" must be when Dimitri would be out participating in that. But what was this trial she'd mentioned? Did they mean like the final trials we had to undergo at the end of the school year?

"They say they don't mind the extra work," continued Alberta, "but I was wondering if you could even things out and take some of their shifts before you leave?"

"Absolutely," he said, words still short and stiff.

"Thanks. I think that'll help." She sighed. "I wish I knew how long this trial was going to be. I don't want to be away that long. You'd think it'd be a done deal with Dashkov, but now I hear the queen's getting cold feet about imprisoning a major royal."

I stiffened. The chill running through me now had nothing to do with the winter day. *Dashkov*?

"I'm sure they'll do the right thing," said Dimitri. I realized at that moment why he wasn't saying much. This wasn't something I was supposed to hear.

"I hope so. And I hope it'll only take a few days, like they claim. Look, it's miserable out here. Would you mind coming into the office for a second to look at the schedule?"

"Sure," he said. "Let me check on something first."

"All right. See you soon."

Silence fell, and I had to assume Alberta was walking away. Sure enough, Dimitri rounded the corner and stood in front of the holly. I shot up from my hiding spot. The look on his face told me he already knew what was coming.

"Rose—"

"Dashkov?" I exclaimed, trying to keep my voice low so Alberta wouldn't hear. "As in Victor Dashkov?"

He didn't bother denying it. "Yes. Victor Dashkov."

"And you guys were talking about . . . Do you mean . . ." I was so startled, so dumbstruck, that I could barely get my thoughts together. This was unbelievable. "I thought he was locked up! Are you saying he hasn't been on trial yet?"

Yes. This was definitely unbelievable. Victor Dashkov. The guy who'd stalked Lissa and tortured her mind and body in order to control her powers. Every Moroi could use magic in one of the four elements: earth, air, water, or fire. Lissa, however, worked an almost unheard of fifth element called spirit. She could heal anything—including the dead. It was the reason I was now psychically linked to her—"shadow-kissed," some called it. She'd brought me

back from the car accident that had killed her parents and brother, binding us together in a way that allowed me to feel her thoughts and experiences.

Victor had learned long before any of us that she could heal, and he'd wanted to lock her away and use her as his own personal Fountain of Youth. He also hadn't hesitated to kill anyone who got in his way—or, in the case of Dimitri and me, use more creative ways to stop his opponents. I'd made a lot of enemies in seventeen years, but I was pretty sure there was no one I hated as much as Victor Dashkov—at least among the living.

Dimitri had a look on his face I knew well. It was the one he got when he thought I might punch someone. "He's been locked up—but no, no trial yet. Legal proceedings sometimes take a long time."

"But there's going to be a trial now? And you're going?" I spoke through clenched teeth, trying to be calm. I suspected I still had the *I'm going to punch someone* look on my face.

"Next week. They need me and some of the other guardians to testify about what happened to you and Lissa that night." His expression changed at the mention of what had occurred four months ago, and again, I recognized the look. It was the fierce, protective one he got when those he cared about were in danger.

"Call me crazy for asking this, but, um, are Lissa and I going with you?" I had already guessed the answer, and I didn't like it.

"No."

"No?"

"No."

I put my hands on my hips. "Look, doesn't it seem reasonable that if you're going to talk about what happened to *us*, then you should have *us* there?"

Dimitri, fully in strict-instructor mode now, shook his head. "The queen and some of the other guardians thought it'd be best if you didn't go. There's enough evidence between the rest of us, and besides, criminal or not, he is—or was—one of the most powerful royals in the world. Those who know about this trial want to keep it quiet."

"So, what, you thought if you brought us, we'd tell everyone?" I exclaimed. "Come on, comrade. You really think we'd do that? The only thing we want is to see Victor locked up. Forever. Maybe longer. And if there's a chance he might walk free, you have to let us go."

After Victor had been caught, he'd been taken to prison, and I'd thought that was where the story had ended. I'd figured they'd locked him up to rot. It had never occurred to me—though it should have—that he'd need a trial first. At the time, his crimes had seemed so obvious. But, although the Moroi government was secret and separate from the human one, it operated in a lot of the same ways. Due process and all that.

"It's not my decision to make," Dimitri said.

"But you have influence. You could speak up for us, especially if . . ." Some of my anger dimmed just a little, replaced by a sudden and startling fear. I almost couldn't say the next words. "Especially if there really is a chance he might get off. Is there? Is there really a chance the queen could let him go?"

"I don't know. There's no telling what she or some of the other high-up royals will do sometimes." He suddenly looked tired. He reached into his

pocket and tossed over a set of keys. “Look, I know you’re upset, but we can’t talk about it now. I have to go meet Alberta, and you need to get inside. The square key will let you in the far side door. You know the one.”

I did. “Yeah. Thanks.”

I was sulking and hated to be that way—especially since he was saving me from getting in trouble—but I couldn’t help it. Victor Dashkov was a criminal—a villain, even. He was power-hungry and greedy and didn’t care who he stepped on to get his way. If he were loose again . . . well, there was no telling what might happen to Lissa or any other Moroi. It enraged me to think that I could do something to help put him away but that no one would let me do it.

I’d taken a few steps forward when Dimitri called out from behind me. “Rose?” I glanced back. “I’m sorry,” he said. He paused, and his expression of regret turned wary. “And you’d better bring the keys back tomorrow.”

I turned away and kept going. It was probably unfair, but some childish part of me believed Dimitri could do anything. If he’d really wanted to get Lissa and me to the trial, I was certain he could have.

When I was almost to the side door, I caught movement in my peripheral vision. My mood plummeted. Great. Dimitri had given me keys to sneak back in, and now someone else had busted me. That was typical of my luck. Half-expecting a teacher to demand to know what I was doing, I turned and prepared an excuse.

But it wasn’t a teacher.

“No,” I said softly. This had to be a trick. “No.”

For half an instant, I wondered if I’d ever really woken up. Maybe I was actually still in bed, asleep and dreaming.

Because surely, *surely* that was the only explanation for what I was now seeing in front of me on the Academy’s lawn, lurking in the shadow of an ancient, gnarled oak.

It was Mason.

TWO

OR, WELL, IT LOOKED LIKE MASON.

He—or it or whatever—was hard to see. I had to keep squinting and blinking to get him in focus. His form was insubstantial—almost translucent—and kept fading in and out of my field of vision.

But yes, from what I could see, he definitely looked like Mason. His features were washed out, making his fair skin look whiter than I recalled. His reddish hair now appeared as a faint, watery orange. I could barely even see his freckles. He was wearing exactly what I'd last seen him in: jeans and a yellow fleece jacket. The edge of a green sweater peeped out from underneath the coat's hem. Those colors, too, were all softened. He looked like a photograph that someone had left out in the sun, causing it to fade. A very, very faint glow seemed to outline his features.

The part that struck me the most—aside from the fact that he was supposed to be dead—was the look on his face. It was sad—so, so sad. Looking into his eyes, I felt my heart break. All the memories of what had taken place just a few weeks ago came rushing back to me. I saw it all again: his body falling, the cruel look on the Strigoi faces. . . . A lump formed in my throat. I stood there frozen, stunned and unable to move.

He studied me too, his expression never changing. Sad. Grim. Serious. He opened his mouth, like he might speak, and then closed it. Several more heavy moments hung between us, and then he lifted his hand and extended it toward me. Something in that motion snapped me out of my daze. No, this could *not* be happening. I wasn't seeing this. Mason was dead. I'd seen him die. I'd held his body.

His fingers moved slightly, like he was beckoning, and I panicked. Backing up a few steps, I put distance between us and waited to see what would

happen. He didn't follow. He simply stood there, hand still in the air. My heart lurched, and I turned and ran. When I'd almost reached the door, I stopped and glanced back, letting my ragged breathing calm down. The clearing he'd stood in was completely empty.

I made it up to my room and slammed the door behind me, hands shaking. I sank onto my bed and replayed what had just happened.

What the hell? That had *not* been real. No way. Impossible. Mason was dead, and everyone knows the dead don't come back. Well, yeah, I had come back . . . but that was a different situation.

Clearly, I'd imagined this. That was it. It *had* to be. I was overtired and still reeling from Lissa and Christian, not to mention that Victor Dashkov news. Probably the cold had frozen part of my brain too. Yes, the more I thought about it, the more I decided there had to be a hundred explanations for what had just happened.

Yet, no matter how often I told myself that, I couldn't fall back asleep. I lay in my bed, covers pulled to my chin as I tried to banish that haunting image from my mind. I couldn't. All I could see were those sad, sad eyes, those eyes that seemed to say, *Rose, why did you let this happen to me?*

I squeezed my eyes shut, trying not to think about him. Since Mason's funeral, I'd been working so hard to go on and act like I was strong. But the truth was, I was nowhere near being over his death. I tortured myself day after day with *what if?* questions. What if I'd been faster and stronger during the Strigoi fight? What if I hadn't told him where the Strigoi were in the first place? And what if I'd simply been able to return his love? Any of those could have kept him alive, but none of them had happened. And it was all my fault.

"I imagined it," I whispered out loud into the darkness of my room. I had to have imagined it. Mason already haunted my dreams. I didn't need to see him when I was awake too. "It wasn't him."

It couldn't have been him, because the only way it could have been was . . . Well, that was something I didn't want to think about. Because while I believed in vampires and magic and psychic powers, I most certainly did *not* believe in ghosts.

I apparently didn't believe in sleep, either, because I didn't get much of it that night. I tossed and turned, unable to quiet my racing mind. I eventually did drift off, but it seemed like my alarm went off so soon after that I could have hardly slept for more than a few minutes.

Among humans, the light of day tends to chase off nightmares and fear. I had no such daylight; I awoke to increasing darkness. But just being out with real and living people had nearly the same effect, and as I went to breakfast and my morning practice, I found that what I'd seen last night—or what I *thought* I'd seen last night—was growing fainter and fainter in my memory.

The weirdness of that encounter was also being replaced by something else: excitement. This was it. The big day. The start of our field experience.

For the next six weeks, I wouldn't have any classes. I'd get to spend my days hanging out with Lissa, and the most I'd have to do was write a daily field report that was only about a half-page long. Easy. And, yeah, of course I'd be on guard duty, but I wasn't concerned. That was second nature to me. She and

I had lived among humans for two years, and I'd protected her the whole time. Before that, when I'd been a freshman, I'd seen the kinds of tests the adult guardians planned for novices during this phase. The ordeals were tricky, absolutely. A novice had to be on watch and not slack—*and* be ready to defend and attack if necessary. None of that worried me, though. Lissa and I had been away from the school our sophomore and junior years, and I'd fallen behind then. Thanks to my extra practices with Dimitri, I'd quickly caught up and was now one of the best in my class.

"Hey, Rose."

Eddie Castile caught up to me as I walked into the gym where our field experience orientation would kick off. For a brief moment, looking at Eddie, my heart sank. Suddenly, it was like I was out in the quad again with Mason, staring at his sorrowful face.

Eddie—along with Lissa's boyfriend, Christian, and a Moroi named Mia—had been with our group when we'd been captured by Strigoi. Eddie hadn't died, obviously, but he'd come very close to it. The Strigoi who'd held us had used him as food, feeding from him throughout our capture in an effort to tease the Moroi and scare the dhampirs. It had worked; I'd been terrified. Poor Eddie had been unconscious for most of the ordeal, thanks to blood loss and the endorphins that came from a vampire's bite. He'd been Mason's best friend and nearly as funny and lighthearted.

But since we'd escaped, Eddie had changed, just like I had. He was still quick to smile and laugh, but there was a grimness to him now, a dark and serious look in his eyes that was always on guard for the worst to happen. That was understandable, of course. He pretty much *had* seen the worst happen. Just like with Mason's death, I held myself responsible for this transformation in Eddie and for what he'd suffered at the hands of the Strigoi. That may not have been fair to me, but I couldn't help it. I felt like I owed him now, like I needed to protect him or make things up to him somehow.

And that was kind of funny, because I think Eddie was trying to protect me. He wasn't stalking me or anything, but I'd noticed him keeping an eye on me. I think after what had happened, he felt he owed it to Mason to watch over his girlfriend. I never bothered to tell Eddie that I hadn't been Mason's girlfriend, not in the real sense of the word, just as I never rebuked Eddie for his big brother behavior. I could certainly take care of myself. But whenever I heard him warning other guys away from me, pointing out that I wasn't ready to date anyone yet, I saw no point in interfering. It was all true. I wasn't ready to date.

Eddie gave me a lopsided smile that added a little boy type of cuteness to his long face. "Are you excited?"

"Hell, yeah," I said. Our classmates were filling in bleachers on one side of the gym, and we found a clear spot near the middle. "It's going to be like a vacation. Me and Lissa, together for six weeks." As frustrating as our bond was sometimes, it nonetheless made me her ideal guardian. I always knew where she was and what was happening to her. Once we graduated and were out in the world, I'd be assigned to her officially.

He turned thoughtful. "Yeah, I guess you don't have to worry as much. You know your assignment when you graduate. The rest of us aren't so lucky."

"You got your sights set on someone royal?" I teased.

"Well, it doesn't matter. Most guardians are assigned to royals lately anyway."

That was true. Dhampirs—half-vampires like me—were in short supply, and royals usually got first pick of guardians. There was a time in the past when more Moroi, royal and non-royal alike, would have gotten guardians, and novices like us would have competed fiercely to get assigned to someone important. Now it was almost a given that every guardian would work for a royal family. There weren't enough of us to go around, and less influential families were on their own.

"Still," I said, "I guess it's a question of which royal you get, right? I mean, some are total snobs, but lots of them are cool. Get someone really rich and powerful, and you could be living at the Royal Court or traveling to exotic places." That last part appealed to me a lot, and I often had fantasies of Lissa and me traveling the world.

"Yup," agreed Eddie. He nodded toward a few guys in the front row. "You wouldn't believe the way those three have been sucking up to some of the Ivashkovs and Szelskys. It won't affect their assignments here, of course, but you can tell they're already trying to set things up after graduation."

"Well, the field experience can affect that. How we're rated on this will go into our records."

Eddie nodded again and started to say something when a loud, clear feminine voice cut through the murmur of our conversation. We both looked up. While we'd been talking, our instructors had gathered in front of the bleachers and now stood facing us in an impressive line. Dimitri was among them, dark and imposing and irresistible. Alberta was trying to call us to attention. The crowd fell silent.

"All right," she began. Alberta was in her fifties, wiry and tough. Seeing her reminded me of the conversation she and Dimitri had had last night, but I filed that away for later. Victor Dashkov was not going to ruin this moment. "You all know why you're here." We'd become so quiet, so tense and excited, that her voice now rang through the gym. "This is the most important day of your education before you take your final trials. Today you will find out which Moroi you've been placed with. Last week, you were given a booklet with the full details of how the next six weeks will play out. I trust you've all read it by now." I had, actually. I'd probably never read anything so thoroughly in my life. "Just to recap, Guardian Alto will highlight the main rules of this exercise."

She handed a clipboard to Guardian Stan Alto. He was one of my least favorite instructors, but after Mason's death, some of the tension between us had lightened. We understood each other better now.

"Here we go," said Stan gruffly. "You'll be on duty six days a week. This is actually a treat for you guys. In the real world, you're usually working every day. You will accompany your Moroi everywhere—to class, to their dorms, to their feedings. Everything. It's up to you to figure out how you fit into their lives. Some Moroi interact with their guardians just like friends; some Moroi prefer you to be more of an invisible ghost who doesn't talk to them." Did he have to use the word *ghost*? "Every situation is different, and you two will

have to find a way to work it out to best ensure their safety.

"Attacks may come at any time, anywhere, and we'll be dressed in all black when it happens. You should always be on your guard. Remember, even though you'll obviously know it's *us* doing the attacking and not real Strigoi, you should respond as though your lives are in terrible, immediate danger. Don't be afraid of hurting us. Some of you, I'm sure, won't have any qualms about getting us back for past grievances." Students in the crowd giggled at this. "But some of you may feel like you have to hold back, for fear of getting in trouble. Don't. You'll get in more trouble if you do hold back. Don't worry. We can take it."

He flipped to the next page of his clipboard. "You will be on duty twenty-four hours a day for your six-day cycles, but you may sleep during daylight when your Moroi does. Just be aware that although Strigoi attacks are rare in daylight, they aren't impossible indoors, and you will not necessarily be 'safe' during these times."

Stan read over a few more technicalities, and I found myself tuning them out. I knew this stuff. We all did. Glancing around, I could see I wasn't alone in my impatience. Excitement and apprehension crackled in the crowd. Hands were clenched. Eyes were wide. We all wanted our assignments. We all wanted this to begin.

When Stan finished, he handed the clipboard to Alberta. "Okay," she said. "I'm going to call out your names one by one and announce who you're paired with. At that time, come down here to the floor, and Guardian Chase will give you a packet containing information about your Moroi's schedule, past, etcetera."

We all straightened up as she leafed through her papers. Students whispered. Beside me, Eddie exhaled heavily. "Oh man. I hope I get someone good," he muttered. "I don't want to be miserable for the next six weeks."

I squeezed his arm reassuringly. "You will," I whispered back. "Er, get someone good, I mean. Not be miserable."

"Ryan Aylesworth," Alberta announced clearly. Eddie flinched, and I instantly knew why. Before, Mason Ashford had always been the first one called on any class lists. That would never happen again. "You are assigned to Camille Conta."

"Damn," muttered someone behind us, who'd apparently been hoping to get Camille.

Ryan was one of the suck-ups in the front row, and he grinned broadly as he walked over to take his packet. The Contas were an up-and-coming royal family. It was rumored that one of their members was a candidate for when the Moroi queen eventually named her heir. Plus, Camille was pretty cute. Following her around wouldn't be too hard for any guy. Ryan, walking with a swagger, seemed very pleased with himself.

"Dean Barnes," she said next. "You have Jesse Zeklos."

"Ugh," Eddie and I both said together. If I'd been assigned to Jesse, he would have needed an extra person to protect him. From me.

Alberta kept reading names, and I noticed Eddie was sweating. "Please, please let me get someone good," he muttered.

"You will," I said. "You will."

"Edison Castile," Alberta announced. He gulped. "Vasilisa Dragomir."

Eddie and I both froze for the space of a heartbeat, and then duty made him stand up and head toward the floor. As he stepped down the bleachers, he shot me a quick, panicked look over his shoulder. His expression seemed to say, *I don't know! I don't know!*

That made two of us. The world around me slowed to a blur. Alberta kept calling names, but I didn't hear any of them. What was going on? Clearly, someone had made a mistake. Lissa was *my* assignment. She had to be. I was going to be her guardian when we graduated. This made no sense. Heart racing, I watched Eddie walk over to Guardian Chase and get his packet and practice stake. He glanced down at the papers immediately, and I suspected he was double-checking the name, certain there was a mix-up. The expression on his face when he looked up told me that it was Lissa's name he'd found.

I took a deep breath. Okay. No need to panic just yet. Someone had made a clerical error here, one that could be fixed. In fact, they'd have to fix it soon. When they got to me and read Lissa's name *again*, they were going to realize they'd double-booked one of the Moroi. They'd straighten it out and give Eddie someone else. After all, there were plenty of Moroi to go around. They outnumbered dhampirs at the school.

"Rosemarie Hathaway." I tensed. "Christian Ozera."

I simply stared at Alberta, unable to move or respond. No. She had *not* just said what I thought. A few people, noticing my lack of movement, glanced back at me. But I was dumbstruck. This wasn't happening. My Mason delusion from last night seemed more real than this. A few moments later, Alberta also realized I wasn't moving. She looked up from her clipboard with annoyance, scanning the crowd.

"Rose Hathaway?"

Someone elbowed me, like maybe I didn't recognize my own name. Swallowing, I stood and walked down the bleachers, robotlike. There was a mistake. There *had* to be a mistake. I headed toward Guardian Chase, feeling like a puppet that someone else was controlling. He handed me my packet and a practice stake meant to "kill" the adult guardians with, and I stepped out of the way for the next person.

Disbelieving, I read the words on the packet's cover three times. *Christian Ozera*. Flipping it open, I saw his life spread out before me. A current picture. His class schedule. His family tree. His bio. It even went into detail about his parents' tragic history, how they'd chosen to become Strigoi and had murdered several people before finally being hunted down and killed.

Our directions at this point had been to read through our dossiers, pack a bag, and then meet up with our Moroi at lunch. As more names were called, many of my classmates lingered around the gym, talking to their friends and showing off their packets. I hovered near one group, discreetly waiting for a chance to talk to Alberta and Dimitri. It was a sign of my newly developing patience that I didn't walk right up to them then and there and demand answers. Believe me, I wanted to. Instead, I let them go through their list, but it felt like forever. Honestly, how long did it take to read a bunch of names?

When the last novice had been assigned his Moroi, Stan shouted above the din for us to move on to the next stage of the assignment and tried to herd out

my classmates. I cut through the crowd and stalked up to Dimitri and Alberta, who blessedly were standing with each other. They were chatting about something administrative and didn't notice me right away.

When they did glance at me, I held up my packet and pointed. "What's this?"

Alberta's face looked blank and confused. Something in Dimitri's told me he'd been expecting this. "It's your assignment, Miss Hathaway," Alberta said.

"No," I said through gritted teeth. "It's not. This is somebody else's assignment."

"The assignments in your field experience aren't optional," she told me sternly. "Just as your assignments in the real world won't be. You can't pick who you protect based on whim and mood, not here and certainly not after graduation."

"But after graduation, I'm going to be Lissa's guardian!" I exclaimed. "Everyone knows that. I'm supposed to have her for this thing."

"I know it's an accepted idea that you'll be together after graduation, but I do not recall any mandatory rulings that say you're 'supposed' to have her or anyone *here* at school. You take who you're assigned."

"Christian?" I threw my packet on the floor. "You're out of your mind if you think I'm guarding him."

"Rose!" snapped Dimitri, joining the conversation at last. His voice was so hard and so sharp that I flinched and forgot what I was saying for half a second. "You're out of line. You do *not* speak to your instructors like that."

I hated being chastised by anyone. I especially hated being chastised by him. And I *especially* hated being chastised by him when he was right. But I couldn't help it. I was too angry, and the lack of sleep was taking its toll. My nerves felt raw and strained, and suddenly, little things seemed difficult to bear. And big things like this? Impossible to bear.

"Sorry," I said with great reluctance. "But this is stupid. Nearly as stupid as not bringing us to Victor Dashkov's trial."

Alberta blinked in surprise. "How did you know—Never mind. We'll deal with that later. For now, this is your assignment, and you need to do it."

Eddie suddenly spoke up beside me, his voice filled with apprehension. I'd lost track of him earlier. "Look . . . I don't mind. . . . We can switch. . . ."

Alberta turned her stony gaze from me to him. "No, you certainly cannot. Vasilisa Dragomir is *your* assignment." She looked back at me. "And Christian Ozera is yours. End of discussion."

"This is stupid!" I repeated. "Why should I waste my time with Christian? Lissa's the one I'm going to be with when I graduate. Seems like if you want me to be able to do a good job, you should have me practice with her."

"You will do a good job with her," said Dimitri. "Because you know her. And you have your bond. But somewhere, someday, you could end up with a different Moroi. You need to learn how to guard someone with whom you have absolutely no experience."

"I have experience with Christian," I grumbled. "That's the problem. I hate him." Okay, that was a huge exaggeration. Christian annoyed me, true, but I didn't really hate him. As I'd said, working together against the Strigoi had changed a lot of things. Again, I felt like my lack of sleep and general

irritability were cranking up the magnitude of everything.

"So much the better," said Alberta. "Not everyone you protect will be your friend. Not everyone you protect will be someone you like. You need to learn this."

"I need to learn how to fight Strigoi," I said. "I've learned that in class." I fixed them with a sharp look, ready to play my trump card. "*And* I've done it in person."

"There's more to this job than the technicalities, Miss Hathaway. There's a whole personal aspect—a bedside manner, if you will—that we don't touch on much in class. We teach you how to deal with the Strigoi. You need to learn how to deal with the Moroi yourselves. And *you* in particular need to deal with someone who has not been your best friend for years."

"You also need to learn what it's like to work with someone when you can't instantly sense that they're in danger," added Dimitri.

"Right," agreed Alberta. "That's a handicap. If you want to be a good guardian—if you want to be an excellent guardian—then you need to do as we say."

I opened my mouth to fight this, to argue that having someone I was so close to would train me up faster and make me a better guardian for any other Moroi. Dimitri cut me off.

"Working with another Moroi will also help keep Lissa alive," he said.

That shut me down. It was pretty much the only thing that could have, and damn him, he knew it.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Lissa's got a handicap too—you. If she never has a chance to learn what it's like to be guarded by someone without a psychic connection, she could be at greater risk if attacked. Guarding someone is really a two-person relationship. This assignment for your field experience is as much for her as for you."

I stayed silent as I processed his words. They almost made sense.

"And," added Alberta, "it's the only assignment you're going to get. If you don't take it, then you opt out of the field experience."

Opt out? Was she crazy? It wasn't like a class I could sit out from for one day. If I didn't do my field experience, I didn't graduate. I wanted to explode about unfairness, but Dimitri stopped me without saying a word. The constant, calm look in his dark eyes held me back, encouraging me to accept this gracefully—or as close as I could manage.

Reluctantly, I picked up the packet. "Fine," I said icily. "I'll do this. But I want it noted that I'm doing this against my will."

"I think we already figured that out, Miss Hathaway," remarked Alberta dryly.

"Whatever. I still think it's a horrible idea, and you eventually will too."

I turned and stormed off across the gym before any of them could respond. In doing so, I fully realized what a bitchy little brat I sounded like. But if they'd just endured their best friend's sex life, seen a ghost, and hardly gotten any sleep, they'd have been bitchy too. Plus, I was about to spend six weeks with Christian Ozera. He was sarcastic, difficult, and made jokes about everything.

Actually, he was a lot like me.

It was going to be a long six weeks.

THREE

"WHY SO GLUM, LITTLE DHAMPIR?"

I was heading across the quad toward the commons, when I detected the scent of clove cigarettes. I sighed.

"Adrian, you are the last person I want to see right now."

Adrian Ivashkov hurried up beside me, blowing a cloud of smoke into the air that of course drifted right toward me. I waved it off and made a great show of exaggerated coughing. Adrian was a royal Moroi we'd "acquired" on our recent ski trip. He was a few years older than me and had come back to St. Vladimir's to work on learning spirit with Lissa. So far, he was the only other spirit user we knew of. He was arrogant and spoiled and spent a lot of his time indulging in cigarettes, alcohol, and women. He also had a crush on me—or at least wanted to get me into bed.

"Apparently," he said. "I've hardly seen you at all since we got back. If I didn't know better, I'd say you were avoiding me."

"I *am* avoiding you."

He exhaled loudly and raked a hand through the sable brown hair he always kept stylishly messy. "Look, Rose. You don't have to keep up with the hard-to-get thing. You've already got me."

Adrian knew perfectly well I wasn't playing hard-to-get, but he always took a particular delight in teasing me. "I'm really not in the mood for your so-called charm today."

"What happened, then? You're stomping through every puddle you can find and look like you're going to punch the first person you see."

"Why are you hanging around, then? Aren't you worried about getting hit?"

"Aw, you'd never hurt me. My face is too pretty."

"Not pretty enough to make up for the gross, carcinogenic smoke blowing in

my face. How can you do that? Smoking's not allowed on campus. Abby Badica got two weeks' detention when she got caught."

"I'm above the rules, Rose. I'm neither student nor staff, merely a free spirit wandering your fair school as I will."

"Maybe you should go do some wandering now."

"You want to get rid of me, you tell me what's going on."

There was no avoiding it. Besides, he'd know soon enough. Everyone would know. "I got assigned to Christian for my field experience."

There was a pause, and then Adrian burst out laughing. "Wow. Now I understand. In light of that, you actually seem remarkably calm."

"I was supposed to have Lissa," I growled. "I can't believe they did this to me."

"Why *did* they do it? Is there some chance you might not be with her when you graduate?"

"No. They just all seem to think this is going to help me train better now. Dimitri and I will still be her real guardians later."

Adrian gave me a sidelong glance. "Oh, I'm sure that'll be quite the hardship for you."

It had to be one of the weirdest things in the universe that Lissa had never come close to suspecting my feelings for Dimitri but that Adrian had figured it out.

"Like I said, your commentary isn't appreciated today."

He apparently didn't agree. I had a suspicious feeling he'd been drinking already, and it was barely even lunchtime. "What's the problem? Christian'll be with Lissa all the time anyway."

Adrian had a point. Not that I'd have admitted it. Then, in that short-attention-span way of his, he switched subjects just as we neared the building.

"Have I mentioned your aura to you?" he asked suddenly. There was a strange note to his voice. Hesitant. Curious. It was *very* uncharacteristic. Everything he usually said was mocking.

"I don't know. Yeah, once. You said it was dark or something. Why?" Auras were fields of light that surrounded every person. Their colors and brightness were allegedly linked to a person's personality and energy. Only spirit users could see them. Adrian had been doing it for as long as he could remember, but Lissa was still learning.

"Hard to explain. Maybe it's nothing." He came to a stop near the door and inhaled deeply on his cigarette. He went out of his way to blow a cloud of smoke away from me, but the wind carried it back. "Auras are strange. They ebb and flow and change colors and brightness. Some are vivid, some are pale. Every once in a while, someone's will settle and burn with such a pure color that you can . . ." He tipped his head back, staring into the sky. I recognized the signs of that weird "unhinged" state he sometimes fell into. "You can instantly grasp what it means. It's like seeing into their soul."

I smiled. "But you haven't figured mine out, huh? Or what any of these colors mean?"

He shrugged. "I'm figuring it out. You talk to enough people, get a feel for what they're like and then start to see the same kinds of people with the same kinds of colors. . . . After a while, the colors start to mean something."

"What's mine look like right now?"

He glanced over at me. "Eh, I can't quite get a fix on it today."

"I knew it. You've been drinking." Substances, like alcohol or certain medications, numbed spirit's effects.

"Just enough to chase the chill away. I can guess what your aura's like, though. It's usually like the others, sort of those swirling colors—it's just kind of edged in darkness. Like you've always got a shadow following you."

Something in his voice made me shiver. Although I'd heard him and Lissa talk about auras a lot, I'd never really thought of them as anything I needed to worry about. They were more like some kind of stage trick—a cool thing with little substance.

"That's so cheerful," I said. "You ever think about motivational speaking?"

His scattered look faded, and his normal mirth returned. "Don't worry, little dhampir. You might be surrounded by clouds, but you'll always be like sunshine to me." I rolled my eyes. He dropped his cigarette onto the sidewalk and put it out with his foot. "Gotta go. See you later." He swept me a gallant bow and started walking away toward guest housing.

"You just littered!" I yelled.

"Above the rules, Rose," he called back. "Above the rules."

Shaking my head, I picked up the now-cold cigarette butt and took it to a garbage can that was outside the building. When I entered, the warmth inside was a welcome change as I shook off the slush on my boots. Down in the cafeteria, I found lunch wrapping up for the afternoon. Here, dhampirs sat side by side with Moroi, providing a study in contrasts. Dhampirs, with our half-human blood, were bigger—though not taller—and more solidly built. The girl novices were curvier than the ultra-slim Moroi girls, the boy novices far more muscular than their vampire counterparts. The Moroi complexions were pale and delicate, like porcelain, while ours were tanned from being outside in the sun so much.

Lissa sat at a table by herself, looking serene and angelic in a white sweater. Her pale blond hair cascaded over her shoulders. She glanced up at my approach, and welcoming feelings flowed to me through our bond.

She grinned. "Oh, look at your face. It's true, isn't it? You really are assigned to Christian."

I glared.

"Would it kill you to be a *little* less miserable?" She gave me a censuring yet amused look as she licked the last of her strawberry yogurt off her spoon. "I mean, he's my boyfriend, after all. I hang out with him all the time. It's not that bad."

"You have the patience of a saint," I grumbled, slouching into a chair. "And besides, you don't hang out with him 24/7."

"Neither will you. It's only 24/6."

"Same difference. It might as well be 24/10."

She frowned. "That doesn't make any sense."

I waved off my idiotic remark and stared blankly around the lunchroom. The room was buzzing with news of the impending field exercise, which would kick off as soon as lunch ended. Camille's best friend had gotten assigned to Ryan's best friend, and the four of them huddled gleefully

together, looking as though they were about to embark on a six-week double date. At least someone would enjoy all this. I sighed. Christian, my soon-to-be charge, was off with the feeders—humans who willingly donated blood to Moroi.

Through our bond, I sensed Lissa wanting to tell me something. She was holding off because she was worried about my bad mood and wanted to make sure I got enough support. I smiled. "Stop worrying about me. What's up?"

She smiled back, her pink-glossed lips hiding her fangs. "I got permission."

"Permission for—?" The answer flitted from her mind faster than she could have voiced it. "What?" I exclaimed. "You're going to stop your meds?"

Spirit was an amazing power, one whose cool abilities we were just starting to figure out. It had a very nasty side effect, however: It could lead to depression and insanity. Part of the reason Adrian indulged in drinking so much (aside from his party nature) was to numb himself against these side effects. Lissa had a much healthier way of doing it. She took antidepressants, which completely cut her off from the magic altogether. She hated not being able to work with spirit anymore, but that was an acceptable trade-off for not going crazy. Well, I thought it was. She apparently disagreed if she was considering this insane experiment. I knew she'd been wanting to try the magic again, but I hadn't really thought she'd go through with it—or that anyone would let her.

"I have to check in with Ms. Carmack every day *and* regularly talk to a counselor." Lissa made a face at this last part, but her overall feelings were still quite upbeat. "I can't wait to see what I can do with Adrian."

"Adrian's a bad influence."

"He didn't make me do this, Rose. I chose it." When I didn't answer, she lightly touched my arm. "Hey, listen. Don't worry. I've been so much better, and lots of people are going to have my back."

"Everyone except me," I told her wistfully. Across the room, Christian entered through a set of double doors and approached us. The clock read five minutes until the end of lunch. "Oh man. The zero hour is almost here."

Christian pulled up a chair at our table and flipped it backwards, letting his chin rest on its slatted back. He brushed his black hair away from his blue eyes and gave us a smug smile. I felt Lissa's heart lighten at his presence.

"I can't wait until this show gets on the road," he said. "You and me are going to have so much fun, Rose. Picking out curtains, doing each other's hair, telling ghost stories. . . ."

The reference to "ghost stories" hit a little closer to home than I was comfortable with. Not that choosing curtains or brushing Christian's hair was much more appealing.

I shook my head in exasperation and stood up. "I'll leave you two alone for your last few private moments." They laughed.

I walked over to the lunch line, hoping to find some leftover doughnuts from breakfast. So far, I could see croissants, quiche, and poached pears. It must have been highbrow day at the cafeteria. Was deep-fried dough really too much to ask for? Eddie stood in front of me. His face turned apologetic as soon as he saw me.

"Rose, I'm really sorry—"

I put up a hand to stop him. “Don’t worry. It’s not your fault. Just promise me you’ll do a good job protecting her.”

It was a silly sentiment since she was in no real danger, but I could never really stop worrying about her—particularly in light of this new development with her medication.

Eddie stayed serious, apparently not thinking my request was silly at all. He was one of the few who knew about Lissa’s abilities—and their downsides, which was probably why he’d been selected to guard her. “I won’t let anything happen to her. I mean it.”

I couldn’t help a smile, in spite of my glum mood. His experiences with the Strigoi made him take all of this more seriously than almost any other novice. Aside from me, he was probably the best choice to guard her.

“Rose, is it true you punched Guardian Petrov?”

I turned and looked into the faces of two Moroi, Jesse Zeklos and Ralf Sarcozy. They’d just stepped in line behind Eddie and me and looked more self-satisfied and annoying than usual. Jesse was all bronzed good looks and quick thinking. Ralf was his slightly less attractive and slightly less intelligent sidekick. They were quite possibly the two people I hated most at this school, mainly due to some nasty rumors they’d spread about me doing some very explicit things with them. It was Mason’s strong-arming that had forced them to tell the truth to the school, and I don’t think they’d ever forgiven me for that.

“Punch Alberta? Hardly.” I started to turn around, but Ralf kept talking.

“We heard you threw a big hissy fit in the gym when you found out who you were with.”

“‘Hissy fit’? What are you, sixty? All I did was—” I paused and carefully chose my words. “—register my opinion.”

“Well,” said Jesse. “I suppose if anyone’s going to keep an eye on that Strigoi wannabe, it might as well be you. You’re the biggest badass around here.”

The grudging tone in his voice made it sound like he was complimenting me. I didn’t see it that way at all. Before he could utter another word, I was standing right in front of him, with barely any space between us. In what I considered a true sign of discipline, I didn’t put my hand around his throat. His eyes widened in surprise.

“Christian has nothing to do with any Strigoi,” I said in a low voice.

“His parents—”

“Are his parents. And he’s Christian. Don’t confuse them.” Jesse had been on the wrong side of my anger before. He was clearly remembering that, and his fear warred with his desire to trash-talk Christian in front of me. Surprisingly, the latter won out.

“Earlier you acted like being with him was the end of the world, and now you’re defending him? You know how he is—he breaks rules all the time. Are you saying you seriously don’t believe there’s any chance at all he might turn Strigoi like his parents?”

“None,” I said. “Absolutely none. Christian’s more willing to take a stand against Strigoi than probably any other Moroi here.” Jesse’s eyes flicked curiously toward Ralf before returning to me. “He even helped me fight

against those ones in Spokane. There is no chance of him ever, *ever* turning Strigoi." I racked my brain, trying to recall who had been assigned to Jesse for the field experience. "And if I hear you spreading that crap around, Dean isn't going to be able to save you from me."

"Or me," added Eddie, who had come to stand right beside me.

Jesse swallowed and took a step back. "You're such a liar. You can't lay a hand on me. If you get suspended now, you'll never graduate."

He was right, of course, but I smiled anyway. "Might be worth it. We'll have to see, huh?"

It was at that point that Jesse and Ralf decided they didn't want anything from the lunch line after all. They stalked off, and I heard something that sounded suspiciously like "crazy bitch."

"Jerks," I muttered. Then I brightened. "Oh, hey. Doughnuts."

I got a chocolate-glazed, and then Eddie and I hurried off to find our Moroi and get to class. He grinned at me. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say you just defended Christian's honor. Isn't he a pain in the ass?"

"Yes," I said, licking icing off my fingers. "He is. But for the next six weeks, he's *my* pain in the ass."

FOUR

IT BEGAN.

At first, things weren't too different from any other day. Dhampirs and Moroi attended separate classes in the first half of the school day, then joined up after lunch. Christian had most of the same afternoon classes I'd had last semester, so it was almost like following my own schedule again. The difference was that I was no longer a student in these classes. I didn't sit at a desk or have to do any of the work. I was also a lot more uncomfortable since I had to stand at the back of the room the entire time, along with other novices who were guarding Moroi. Outside the school, this was what it was usually like. Moroi came first. Guardians were shadows.

There was a strong temptation to talk to our fellow novices, particularly during times when the Moroi were working on their own and talking amongst themselves. None of us cracked, though. The pressure and adrenaline of the first day had us all on good behavior.

After biology, Eddie and I started using a bodyguard technique called pair guarding. I was near guard and walked with Lissa and Christian for immediate defense. Eddie, being far guard, walked farther away and scanned the larger area for any potential threats.

We followed this pattern for the rest of the day, up until the last class came around. Lissa gave Christian a quick kiss on the cheek, and I realized they were parting.

"You guys don't have the same schedule this time?" I asked with dismay, stepping over to the side of the hall to stay out of student traffic. Eddie had already deduced that we were parting and had stopped far guard duties to come talk to us. I hadn't known how Lissa and Christian's schedules lined up for this new semester.

Lissa took in my disappointed look and gave me a sympathetic smile. “Sorry. We’re going to study together after school, but right now, I’ve got to go to creative writing.”

“And I,” declared Christian loftily, “have to go to culinary science.”

“Culinary science?” I cried. “You elected *culinary science*? That’s like the most brainless class ever.”

“It is not,” he countered. “And even if it was . . . well, hey, it’s my last semester, right?” I groaned.

“Come on, Rose,” laughed Lissa. “It’s just one class period. It won’t be that —”

She was cut off when a commotion broke out farther down the hall. We and everyone near us stopped and stared. One of my guardian instructors, Emil, had practically appeared out of nowhere and—playing Strigoi—reached for a Moroi girl. He swung her away, pressing her to his chest and exposing her neck as though he would bite her. I couldn’t see who she was, just a tangle of brown hair, but her assigned protector was Shane Reyes. The attack had caught him by surprise—it was the first one of the day—but he fumbled only a little as he kicked Emil in the side and wrested the girl away. The two guys squared off, and everyone watched eagerly. A few even whistled and shouted, cheering Shane on.

One of the catcallers was Ryan Aylesworth. He was so fixated on watching the fight—which Shane, wielding his practice stake, had just about won—that he didn’t notice two other adult guardians sneaking up on him and Camille. Eddie and I realized it at the same time and stiffened, instinct readying both of us to spring forward.

“Stay with them,” Eddie told me. He headed toward Ryan and Camille, who had just discovered they were being set upon. Ryan didn’t react as well as Shane had, particularly since he faced two attackers. One of the guardians distracted Ryan while the other—Dimitri, I now saw—grabbed Camille. She screamed, not faking her fear. She apparently didn’t find being in Dimitri’s arms as thrilling as I did.

Eddie headed toward them, approaching from behind, and landed a blow on the side of Dimitri’s head. It hardly fazed Dimitri, but I was still amazed. I’d barely ever been able to land a hit on him in all our trainings. Eddie’s attack forced Dimitri to release Camille and face this new threat. He spun around, graceful as a dancer, and advanced on Eddie.

Meanwhile, Shane had “staked” his Strigoi and jumped in to help Eddie, moving around to Dimitri’s other side. I watched, fists clenched in excitement, intrigued with the fighting in general and with watching Dimitri in particular. It amazed me that someone so deadly could be so beautiful. I wished I was part of the fray but knew I had to watch the area around me in case any “Strigoi” attacked here.

But they didn’t. Shane and Eddie successfully “finished off” Dimitri. Part of me was a little sad at this. I wanted Dimitri to be good at everything. However, Ryan had tried to help and failed. Dimitri had technically “killed” him, so I felt a twisted comfort in thinking that Dimitri had still been a badass Strigoi. He and Emil praised Shane for being fast on his feet and Eddie for realizing we had to treat this as a group endeavor rather than one-on-one

trials. I got a nod for watching Eddie's back, and Ryan was chastised for not paying attention to his Moroi.

Eddie and I grinned at each other, happy over getting high marks on this first test. I wouldn't have minded a slightly bigger role, but this wasn't a bad start to the field experience. We high-fived, and I saw Dimitri shake his head at us as he left.

With the drama over, our foursome split up. Lissa gave me one last smile over her shoulder and spoke to me through the bond, *Have fun in culinary science!* I rolled my eyes, but she and Eddie had already rounded a corner.

"Culinary science" sounded pretty impressive, but really, it was just a fancy term for what was essentially a cooking class. Despite my teasing Christian about it being brainless, I had some respect for it. I could barely boil water, after all. Still, it was a lot different from an elective like creative writing or debate, and I had no doubts Christian was taking it as a blow-off class and not because he wanted to be a chef someday. At least I might get some satisfaction out of watching him mix a cake or something. Maybe he'd even wear an apron.

There were three other novices in the class who were guarding Moroi. Since the culinary science room was large and open, with lots of windows, the four of us worked together to come up with a plan to pool our efforts and secure the whole room. When I'd watched novices do their field experiences in past years, I'd only ever paid attention to the fights. I'd never noticed the teamwork and strategizing that must have been going on. Theoretically, the four of us were here to only protect our assigned Moroi, but we'd slipped into a role where we were protecting the whole class.

My post was by a fire door that led outside of the school. Coincidentally, it was right by the station Christian was working at. The class normally cooked in pairs, but there was an odd number of students. Rather than work in a group of three, Christian had volunteered to be by himself. No one had seemed to mind. Many still regarded him and his family with the same prejudice that Jesse did. To my disappointment, Christian wasn't making a cake.

"What is that?" I asked, watching him take out a bowl of some kind of raw, ground-up meat from the refrigerator.

"Meat," he said, dumping it onto a cutting board.

"I know that, you idiot. What kind?"

"Ground beef." He pulled another container out and then another. "And this is veal. And this is pork."

"Do you have, like, a T. rex that you're going to feed?"

"Only if you want some. This is for meatloaf."

I stared. "With three kinds of meat?"

"Why eat something called meatloaf if you aren't actually going to get some meat out of it?"

I shook my head. "I can't believe this is only the first day with you."

He glanced down, focusing on kneading his tri-meat creation together. "You sure are making a big deal out of this. Do you really hate me that much? I heard you were screaming at the top of your lungs back in the gym."

"No, I wasn't. And . . . I don't hate you at all," I admitted.

"You're just taking it out on me because you didn't get paired with Lissa."

I didn't answer. He wasn't that far off.

"You know," he continued, "it might actually be a good idea for you to practice with someone different."

"I know. That's what Dimitri says too."

Christian put the meat into a bowl and started adding some other ingredients. "Then why question it? Belikov knows what he's doing. I'd trust anything he says. It sucks that they're going to lose him after we graduate, but I'd rather see him with Lissa."

"Me too."

He paused and looked up, meeting my eyes. We both smiled, amused at how shocked we were to have agreed with each other. A moment later, he returned to his work.

"You're good too," he said, not *too* grudgingly. "The way you handled yourself . . ."

He didn't finish the thought, but I knew what he was talking about. Spokane. Christian hadn't been around when I killed the Strigoi, but he'd been instrumental in helping with the escape. He and I had teamed up, using his fire magic as a means of letting me subdue our captors. We'd worked well together, all of our animosity put aside.

"I guess you and I have better things to do than fight all the time," I mused. Like worry about Victor Dashkov's trial, I realized. For a moment, I considered telling Christian what I'd learned. He'd been around the night it had all gone down with Victor last fall, but I decided not to mention the news just yet. Lissa needed to hear it first.

"Yup," Christian said, unaware of my thoughts. "Brace yourself, but we aren't that different. I mean, I'm smarter and a lot funnier, but at the end of the day, we both want to keep her safe." He hesitated. "You know . . . I'm not going to take her away from you. I can't. No one can, not as long as you guys have that bond."

I was surprised he'd brought this up. I honestly suspected that there were two reasons he and I argued a lot. One was that we both had personalities that liked to argue. The other reason—the big one—was that we were each envious of the other's relationship with Lissa. But, as he'd said, we really had the same motives. We cared about her.

"And don't think the bond will keep you guys apart," I said. I knew the link bothered him. How could you ever get romantically close to someone when they had that kind of connection with another person, even if that other person was just a friend? "She cares about you. . . ." I couldn't bring myself to say "loves." "She has a whole separate place for you in her heart."

Christian put his dish in the oven. "You did *not* just say that. I have a feeling we're on the verge of hugging and coming up with cute nicknames for each other." He was trying to look disgusted at my sentiment, but I could tell he liked being told that Lissa cared about him.

"I already have a nickname for you, but I'll get in trouble if I say it in class."

"Ah," he said happily. "*That's* the Rose I know."

He went off to talk to another friend while his meatloaf cooked, which was probably just as well. My door was a vulnerable position, and I shouldn't have

been chatting away, even if the rest of the class was. Across the room, I saw Jesse and Ralf working together. Like Christian, they'd chosen a blow-off class too.

No attacks occurred, but a guardian named Dustin did come in to make notes on us novices as we held our positions. He was standing near me right when Jesse chose to stroll by. At first, I thought it was a coincidence—until Jesse spoke.

"I take back what I said earlier, Rose. I figured it out. You aren't upset because of Lissa or Christian. You're upset because the rules say you have to be with a student, and Adrian Ivashkov's too old. The way I hear it, you guys have already had a lot of practice watching each other's bodies."

That joke could have been *so* much funnier, but I'd learned not to expect too much from Jesse. I knew for a fact that he didn't care about Adrian and me. I also suspected he didn't even believe we had anything going on. But Jesse was still bitter about me threatening him earlier, and here was his chance to get back at me. Dustin, standing within earshot, had no interest in Jesse's idiotic teasing. Dustin would probably have an interest, however, if I slammed Jesse's face into the wall.

That didn't mean I had to be silent, though. Guardians talked to Moroi all the time; they just tended to be respectful and still keep an eye on their surroundings. So I gave Jesse a small smile and simply said, "Your wit is always such a delight, Mr. Zeklos. I can barely contain myself around it." I then turned away and surveyed the rest of the room.

When Jesse realized I wasn't going to do anything else, he laughed and walked away, apparently thinking he'd won some great victory. Dustin left shortly thereafter.

"Asshole," muttered Christian, returning to his station. Class had about five minutes left.

My eyes followed Jesse across the room. "You know something, Christian? I'm pretty happy to be guarding you."

"If you're comparing me to Zeklos, I don't really take that as much of a compliment. But here, try this. Then you'll really be glad you're with me."

His masterpiece was finished, and he gave me a piece. I hadn't realized it, but just before the meatloaf had gone in, he'd wrapped it in bacon.

"Good God," I said. "This is the most stereotypical vampire food ever."

"Only if it was raw. What do you think?"

"It's good," I said reluctantly. Who knew that bacon would make all the difference? "Really good. I think you have a promising future as a housewife while Lissa works and makes millions of dollars."

"Funny, that's exactly my dream."

We left the class in lighter moods. Things had grown more friendly between us, and I decided that I could handle the next six weeks protecting him.

He and Lissa were going to meet in the library to study—or pretend to study—but he had to stop by his dorm first. So I followed him across the quad, back into the winter air that had grown chillier since sunset seven hours ago. The snow on the paths, which had turned slushy in the sun, had now frozen up and made walking treacherous. Along the way, we were joined by Brandon Lazar, a Moroi who lived in Christian's hall. Brandon could barely contain

himself, recapping a fight he'd witnessed in his math class. We listened to his rendition, all of us laughing at the thought of Alberta sneaking in through the window.

"Hey, she might be old, but she could take on almost any of us," I told them. I gave Brandon a puzzled look. He had bruises and red splotches on his face. He also had a few weird welts near his ear. "What happened to you? Have you been fighting guardians too?"

His smile promptly disappeared, and he looked away from me. "Nah, just fell."

"Come on," I said. Moroi might not train to fight like dhampirs did, but they got in brawls with each other just as often as anyone else. I tried to think of any Moroi he might have a conflict with. For the most part, Brandon was pretty likeable. "That's the lamest, most unoriginal excuse in the world."

"It's true," he said, still avoiding my eyes.

"If someone's screwing with you, I can give you a few pointers."

He turned back to me, locking eyes. "Just let it go." He wasn't hostile or anything, but there was a firm note in his voice. It was almost like he believed saying the words alone would make me obey him.

I chuckled. "What are you trying to do? Compel me—"

Suddenly, I saw movement on my left. A slight shadow blending in with the dark shapes of a cluster of snowy pine trees—but moving just enough to catch my attention. Stan's face emerged from the darkness as he sprang toward us.

Finally, my first test.

Adrenaline shot through me just as strongly as if a real Strigoi were approaching. I reacted instantly, reaching out to grab both Brandon and Christian. That was always the first move, to throw my own life before theirs. I jerked the two guys to a halt and turned toward my attacker, reaching for my stake in order to defend the Moroi—

And that's when he appeared.

Mason.

He stood several feet in front of me, off to Stan's right, looking just as he had last night. Translucent. Shimmering. Sad.

The hair on the back of my neck stood up. I froze, unable to move or finish going for my stake. I forgot about what I'd been doing and completely lost track of the people and commotion around me. The world slowed down, everything fading around me. There was only Mason—that ghostly, shimmering Mason who glowed in the dark and seemed like he so badly wanted to tell me something. The same feeling of helplessness I'd experienced in Spokane returned to me. I hadn't been able to help him then. I couldn't help him now. My stomach turned cold and hollow. I could do nothing except stand there, wondering what he was trying to say.

He lifted one translucent hand and pointed off toward the other side of campus, but I didn't know what it meant. There was so much over there, and it wasn't clear what he was pointing at. I shook my head, not understanding but desperately wishing I could. The sorrow on his face seemed to grow.

Suddenly, something slammed into my shoulder, and I stumbled forward. The world suddenly started up again, snapping me out of the dreamy state I'd just been in. I only barely managed to throw out my hands in time to stop

myself from hitting the ground. I looked up and saw Stan standing over me.

"Hathaway!" he barked. "What are you doing?"

I blinked, still trying to shake off the weirdness of seeing Mason again. I felt sluggish and dazed. I looked into Stan's angry face and then glanced over at where Mason had been. He was gone. I turned my attention back to Stan and realized what had happened. In my distraction, I'd completely spaced while he'd staged his attack. He now had one arm around Christian's neck and one around Brandon's. He wasn't hurting them, but his point was made.

"If I had been a Strigoi," he growled, "these two would be dead."

FIVE

MOST DISCIPLINARY ISSUES AT the Academy went to Headmistress Rivera. She oversaw Moroi and dhampirs alike and was known for her creative and oft-used repertoire of punishments. She wasn't cruel, exactly, but she wasn't soft, either. She simply took student behavior seriously and dealt with it as she saw fit.

There were some issues, however, that were beyond her jurisdiction.

The school's guardians calling together a disciplinary committee wasn't unheard of, but it was very, very rare. You had to do something pretty serious to piss them off to get that sort of response. Like, say, willfully endangering a Moroi. Or *hypothetically* willfully endangering a Moroi.

"For the last time," I growled, "I didn't do it on purpose."

I sat in one of the guardians' meeting rooms, facing my committee: Alberta, Emil, and one of the other rare female guardians on campus, Celeste. They sat at a long table, looking imposing, while I sat in a single chair and felt very vulnerable. Several other guardians were sitting in and watching, but thankfully, none of my classmates were there to see this humiliation. Dimitri was among the watchers. He was not on the committee, and I wondered if they'd kept him off because of his potentially biased role as my mentor.

"Miss Hathaway," said Alberta, fully in her strict-captain mode, "you must know why we have a hard time believing that."

Celeste nodded. "Guardian Alto saw you. You refused to protect two Moroi—including the one whose protection you were specifically assigned to."

"I didn't refuse!" I exclaimed. "I . . . fumbled."

"That wasn't a fumble," said Stan from the watchers. He glanced at Alberta for permission to speak. "May I?" She nodded, and he turned back to me. "If you'd blocked or attacked me and then messed up, that would be a fumble.

But you didn't block. You didn't attack. You didn't even try. You just stood there like a statue and did nothing."

Understandably, I was outraged. The thought that I would purposely leave Christian and Brandon to be "killed" by a Strigoi was ridiculous. But what could I do? I either confessed to screwing up majorly or to having seen a ghost. Neither option was appealing, but I had to cut my losses. One made me look incompetent. The other made me look insane. I didn't want to be associated with either of those. I much preferred my usual description of "reckless" and "disruptive."

"Why am I getting in trouble for messing up?" I asked tightly. "I mean, I saw Ryan mess up earlier. He didn't get in trouble. Isn't that the point of this whole exercise? *Practice*? If we were perfect, you'd already have unleashed us upon the world!"

"Weren't you listening?" said Stan. I swore I could see a vein throbbing in his forehead. I think he was the only one there as upset as I was. At the very least, he was the only one (aside from me) showing his emotions. The others wore poker faces, but then, none of them had witnessed what had happened. If I'd been in Stan's place, I might have thought the worst of me too. "You didn't mess up, because 'messing up' implies that you have to actually *do* something."

"Okay, then. I froze." I looked at him defiantly. "Does that count as messing up? I cracked under the pressure and blanked out. It turns out I wasn't prepared. The moment came, and I panicked. It happens to novices all the time."

"To a novice who has already killed Strigoi?" asked Emil. He was from Romania, his accent a bit thicker than Dimitri's Russian one. It wasn't nearly as nice, though. "It seems unlikely."

I dealt out glares to him and everyone else in the room. "Oh, I see. After one incident, I'm now expected to be an expert Strigoi killer? I can't panic or be afraid or anything? Makes sense. Thanks, guys. Fair. Real fair." I slumped back in my seat, arms crossed over my chest. There was no need to fake bitchy defiance. I had plenty of it to dish out.

Alberta sighed and leaned forward. "We're arguing semantics. Technicalities aren't the point here. What's important is that this morning, you made it very clear you did not want to guard Christian Ozera. In fact . . . I think you even said you wanted us to be sure we knew that you were doing it against your will *and* that we'd soon see what a horrible idea it was." Ugh. I *had* said that. Honestly, what had I been thinking? "And then, when your first test comes around, we find you completely and utterly unresponsive."

I nearly flew out of my chair. "That's what this is about? You think I didn't protect him because of some kind of weird revenge thing?"

All three of them stared at me expectantly.

"You aren't exactly known for calmly and gracefully accepting things you don't like," she replied wryly.

This time, I did stand up, pointing my finger at her accusingly. "*Not* true. I have followed every rule Kirova laid down for me since coming back here. I've gone to every practice and obeyed every curfew." Well, I'd fudged some of the curfews but not willfully. It had always been for the greater good. "There's no

reason I'd do this as some kind of revenge! What good would it do? Sta—Guardian Alto wasn't going to really hurt Christian, so it's not like I'd get to see him punched or anything. The only thing I would accomplish is getting dragged into the middle of something like *this* and possibly facing removal from the field experience."

"You *are* facing removal from the field experience," replied Celeste flatly.

"Oh." I sat down, suddenly not feeling as bold. Silence hung in the room for several moments, and then I heard Dimitri's voice speak from behind me.

"She has a point," he said. My heart thumped loudly in my chest. Dimitri knew I wouldn't take revenge like that. He didn't think I was petty. "If she were going to protest or take revenge, she'd do it in a different way." Well, not *too* petty, at least.

Celeste frowned. "Yes, but after the scene she made this morning . . ."

Dimitri took a few steps forward and stood beside my chair. Having his solid presence nearby comforted me. I had a flash of déjà vu, back to when Lissa and I had returned to the Academy last autumn. Headmistress Kirova had nearly expelled me, and Dimitri had stood up for me then too.

"This is all circumstantial," he said. "Regardless of how suspicious you think it looks, there's no proof. Removing her from the experience—and essentially ruining her graduation—is a bit extreme without any certainties."

The committee looked thoughtful, and I focused my attention on Alberta. She had the most power here. I'd always liked her, and in our time together, she'd been strict but always scrupulously fair. I hoped that would still hold true. She beckoned Celeste and Emil toward her, and the other two guardians leaned closer. They had a whispered conference. Alberta gave a resigned nod, and the others leaned back.

"Miss Hathaway, do you have anything you'd like to say before we tell you our conclusions?"

That I'd *like* to say? Hell, yeah. There were tons of things. I wanted to say that I wasn't incompetent. I wanted to tell them that I was one of the best novices here. I wanted to tell them that I had seen Stan coming *and* had been on the verge of reacting. I especially wanted to tell them that I *didn't* want to have this mark on my record. Even if I stayed in the field experience, I'd essentially have an F for this first test. It would affect my overall grade, which could subsequently affect my future.

But again, what choice did I have? Tell them that I'd seen a ghost? The ghost of a guy who'd had a major crush on me and who had quite likely died because of that crush? I still didn't know what was going on with these sightings. One time I could write off to exhaustion . . . but I'd seen him—or it—twice now. Was he real? My higher reasoning said no, but honestly, it didn't matter at the moment. If he was real and I told them, they'd think I was crazy. If he wasn't real and I told them, they'd think I was crazy—and they'd be right. I couldn't win here.

"No, Guardian Petrov," I said, hoping I sounded meek. "Nothing more to add."

"All right," she said wearily. "Here's what we've decided. You're lucky you have Guardian Belikov to advocate for you, or this decision might have been different. We're giving you the benefit of the doubt. You'll go on with the field

experience and continue to guard Mr. Ozera. You'll just be on a probation of sorts."

"That's okay," I said. I'd been on probation for most of my academic life. "Thank you."

"And," she added. *Uh-oh.* "Because the suspicion isn't entirely removed, you'll be spending your day off this week doing community service."

I jumped out of my chair again. "What?"

Dimitri's hand wrapped around my wrist, his fingers warm and controlling. "Sit down," he murmured in my ear, tugging me toward the chair. "Take what you can get."

"If that's a problem, we can make it next week too," warned Celeste. "And the next five after that."

I sat down and shook my head. "I'm sorry. Thank you."

The hearing dispersed, and I was left feeling weary and beaten. Had only one day gone by? Surely the happy excitement I'd felt before the field experience had been weeks ago and not this morning. Alberta told me to go find Christian, but Dimitri asked if he could have some time alone with me. She agreed, no doubt hoping he'd set me on the straight and narrow.

The room emptied, and I thought he'd sit and talk to me then and there, but instead he walked over to a small table that held a water dispenser, coffee, and other beverages.

"You want some hot chocolate?" he asked.

I hadn't expected that. "Sure."

He dumped four packets of instant hot chocolate into two Styrofoam cups and then added in hot water.

"Doubling it is the secret," he said when the cups were full.

He handed me mine, along with a wooden stirrer, and then walked toward a side door. Presuming I was supposed to follow him, I scurried to catch up without spilling my hot chocolate.

"Where are we—oh."

I stepped through the doorway and found myself in a little glass-enclosed porch filled with small patio tables. I'd had no idea this porch was adjacent to the meeting room, but then, this was the building the guardians conducted all campus business out of. Novices were rarely allowed. I also hadn't realized the building was built around a small courtyard, which was what this porch looked out to. In the summer, I imagined one could open the windows and be surrounded in greenery and warm air. Now, encased in glass and frost, I felt like I was in some kind of an ice palace.

Dimitri swept his hand over a chair, brushing off dust. I did the same and sat down opposite him. Apparently this room didn't see a lot of use in the winter. Because it was enclosed, the room was warmer than outdoors, but it wasn't heated otherwise. The air felt chilly, and I warmed my hands on my cup. Silence fell between Dimitri and me. The only noise came from me blowing on my hot chocolate. He drank his right away. He'd been killing Strigoi for years. What was a little scalding water here and there?

As we sat, and the quiet grew, I studied him over the edge of my cup. He wasn't looking at me, but I knew he knew I was watching. Like every other time I looked at him, I was always struck by his looks first. The soft dark hair

that he often tucked behind his ears without realizing it, hair that never *quite* wanted to stay in its tie at the back of his neck. His eyes were brown too, somehow gentle and fierce at the same time. His lips had that same contradictory quality, I realized. When he was fighting or dealing with something grim, those lips would flatten and turn hard. But in lighter times . . . when he laughed or kissed . . . well, then they'd become soft and wonderful.

Today, more than his exterior hit me. I felt warm and safe just being with him. He brought comfort after my terrible day. So often with other people, I felt a need to be the center of attention, to be funny and always have something clever to say. It was a habit I needed to shake to be a guardian, seeing as that job required so much silence. But with Dimitri, I never felt like I had to be anything more than what I already was. I didn't have to entertain him or think up jokes or even flirt. It was enough to just be together, to be so completely comfortable in each other's presence—smoldering sexual tension aside—that we lost all sense of self-consciousness. I exhaled and drank my cocoa.

"What happened out there?" he asked at last, meeting my gaze. "You didn't crack under the pressure."

His voice was curious, not accusatory. He wasn't treating me as a student right now, I realized. He was regarding me as an equal. He simply wanted to know what was going on with me. There was no discipline or lecturing here.

And that just made it all the worse when I had to lie to him.

"Of course it was," I told him, looking down into my cup. "Unless you believe I really did let Stan 'attack' Christian."

"No," he said. "I don't believe that. I never did. I knew you'd be unhappy when you found out about the assignments, but I never once doubted that you'd do what you'd have to for this. I knew you wouldn't let your personal feelings get in the way of your duty."

I looked up again and met his eyes, so full of faith and absolute confidence in me. "I didn't. I was mad. . . . Still am a little. But once I said I'd do it, I meant it. And after spending some time with him . . . well, I don't hate him. I actually think he's good for Lissa, and he cares about her, so I can't get upset about that. He and I just clash sometimes, that's all . . . but we did really well together against the Strigoi. I remembered that while I was with him today, and arguing against this assignment just seemed stupid. So I decided to do the best job I could."

I hadn't meant to talk so much, but it felt good to let out what was inside of me, and the look on Dimitri's face would have gotten me to say anything. Almost anything.

"What happened then?" he asked. "With Stan?"

I averted my eyes and played with my cup again. I hated keeping things from him, but I couldn't tell him about this. In the human world, vampires and dhampirs were creatures of myth and legend—bedtime stories to scare children. Humans didn't know we were real and walking the earth. But just because we were real didn't mean that every other story-time paranormal creature was. We knew that and had our own myths and bedtime stories about things we didn't believe in. Werewolves. Bogeymen. Ghosts.

Ghosts played no real role in our culture, short of being fodder for pranks

and campfire tales. Ghosts inevitably came up on Halloween, and some legends endured over the years. But in real life? No ghosts. If you came back after death, it was because you were a Strigoi.

At least, that's what I'd always been taught. I honestly didn't know enough now to say what was going on. Me imagining Mason seemed more likely than him being a true ghost, but man, that meant I might seriously be heading into crazy territory. All this time I'd worried about Lissa losing it. Who had known it might be me?

Dimitri was still watching me, waiting for an answer.

"I don't know what happened out there. My intentions were good . . . I just . . . I just messed up."

"Rose. You're a terrible liar."

I glanced up. "No, I'm not. I've told a lot of good lies in my life. People have believed them."

He smiled slightly. "I'm sure. But it doesn't work with me. For one thing, you won't look me in the eye. As for the other . . . I don't know. I can just tell."

Damn. He *could* tell. He just knew me that well. I stood up and moved to the door, keeping my back to him. Normally, I treasured every minute with him, but I couldn't stick around today. I hated lying, but I didn't want to tell the truth either. I had to leave.

"Look, I appreciate you being worried about me . . . but really, it's okay. I just messed up. I'm embarrassed about it—and sorry I put your awesome training to shame—but I'll rebound. Next time, Stan's ass is mine."

I hadn't even heard him get up, but suddenly, Dimitri was right behind me. He placed a hand on my shoulder, and I froze in front of the door leading out. He didn't touch me anywhere else. He didn't try to pull me closer. But, oh, that one hand on my shoulder held all the power in the world.

"Rose," he said, and I knew he was no longer smiling. "I don't know why you're lying, but I know you wouldn't do it without a good reason. And if there's something wrong—something you're afraid to tell the others—"

I spun around rapidly, somehow managing to pivot in place in such a way that his hand never moved yet ended up on my other shoulder.

"I'm not afraid," I cried. "I do have my reasons, and believe me, what happened with Stan was nothing. Really. All of this is just something stupid that got blown out of proportion. Don't feel sorry for me or feel like you have to do anything. What happened sucks, but I'll just roll with it and take the black mark. I'll take care of everything. I'll take care of me." It took all of my strength just then not to shake. How had this day gotten so bizarre and out of control?

Dimitri didn't say anything. He just looked down at me, and the expression on his face was one I'd never seen before. I couldn't interpret it. Was he mad? Disapproving? I just couldn't tell. The fingers on my shoulder tightened slightly and then relaxed.

"You don't have to do this alone," he said at last. He sounded almost wistful, which made no sense. He was the one who'd been telling me for so long that I needed to be strong. I wanted to throw myself into his arms just then, but I knew I couldn't.

I couldn't help a smile. "You say that . . . but tell me the truth. Do *you* go running to others when you have problems?"

"That's the not the same—"

"Answer the question, comrade."

"Don't call me that."

"And don't avoid the question either."

"No," he said. "I try to deal with my problems on my own."

I slipped away from his hand. "See?"

"But you have a lot of people in your life you can trust, people who care about you. That changes things."

I looked at him in surprise. "You don't have people who care about you?"

He frowned, obviously rethinking his words. "Well, I've always had good people in my life . . . and there have been people who cared about me. But that doesn't necessarily mean I could trust them or tell them everything."

I was often so distracted by the weirdness of our relationship that I rarely thought about Dimitri as someone with a life away from me. He was respected by everyone on campus. Teachers and students alike knew him as one of the deadliest guardians here. Whenever we ran into guardians from outside the school, they always seemed to know and respect him too. But I couldn't recall ever having seen him in any sort of social setting. He didn't appear to have any close friends among the other guardians—just coworkers he liked. The friendliest I'd ever seen him get with someone had been when Christian's aunt, Tasha Ozera, visited. They'd known each other for a long time, but even that hadn't been enough for Dimitri to pursue once her visit was over.

Dimitri was alone an awful lot, I realized, content to hole up with his cowboy novels when not working. I *felt* alone a lot, but in truth, I was almost always surrounded by people. With him being my teacher, I tended to view things as one-sided: He was the one always giving me something, be it advice or instruction. But I gave him something too, something harder to define—a connection with another person.

"Do you trust me?" I asked him.

The hesitation was brief. "Yes."

"Then trust me now, and don't worry about me just this once."

I stepped away, out of the reach of his arm, and he didn't say anything more or try to stop me. Cutting through the room that I'd had the hearing in, I headed for the building's main exit, tossing the remnants of my hot chocolate in a garbage can as I walked past.

SIX

THERE HAD ONLY BEEN THREE other witnesses to what had happened out on the quad. Yet, unsurprisingly, everyone seemed to know about it when I returned to the commons later on. Classes were done, but plenty of students moved about in the corridors, off to study or retake tests or whatever. They tried to hide their glances and whispers, but they didn't do a very good job. Those who made eye contact with me either gave me tight-lipped smiles or immediately looked away. Wonderful.

With no psychic link to Christian, I had no clue where to find him. I could sense that Lissa was in the library and figured that would be a good place to start looking. On my way there, I heard a guy's voice call out behind me.

"Took things a bit far, didn't you?"

I turned around and saw Ryan and Camille walking several steps back. If I'd been a guy, the appropriate response would have been, "You mean with your mom?" Because I was not a guy, though, and because I had manners, I just said, "Don't know what you're talking about."

Ryan hurried to catch up with me. "You know exactly what I mean. With Christian. I heard that when Stan attacked, you were just like, 'Here, take him,' and walked away."

"Oh good God," I groaned. It was bad enough when everyone was talking about you, but why did the stories always end up changing? "That is *not* what happened."

"Oh yeah?" he asked. "Then why did you get called in to see Alberta?"

"Look," I said, not feeling so well mannered anymore, "I just messed up the attack . . . you know, kind of like you did earlier when you weren't paying attention in the hall?"

"Hey," he said, flushing slightly. "I ended up getting in on that—I did my

part."

"Is that what they're calling getting killed nowadays?"

"At least I wasn't a whiny bitch who refused to fight."

I had just about calmed down after speaking with Dimitri, but now my temper was rising already. It was like a thermometer ready to burst. "You know, maybe instead of criticizing others, you should pay more attention to your own guardian duties." I nodded toward Camille. She had thus far been quiet, but her face showed me she was eating all of this up.

Ryan shrugged. "I can do both. Shane's farther behind us, and the area ahead is clear. No doors. Easy." He patted Camille's shoulder. "She's safe."

"It's an easy place to secure. You wouldn't do so well in the real world with real Strigoi."

His smile faded. Anger glinted in his eyes. "Right. The way I hear it, you didn't do such a great job out there either, at least not as far as Mason was concerned."

Taunting over what had happened with Stan and Christian was one thing. But implying that I was at fault for Mason's death? Unacceptable. *I* was the one who'd kept Lissa safe for two years in the human world. *I* was the one who had killed two Strigoi in Spokane. *I* was the only novice at this school with *molnija* marks, the little tattoos given to guardians to mark Strigoi kills. I'd known there had been some whispers about what had happened to Mason, but no one had ever actually said anything to me. The thought of Ryan or anyone else thinking I was to blame for Mason dying was too much. I blamed myself plenty enough already without their help.

The thermometer broke.

In one smooth motion, I reached past him, grabbed Camille, and swung her up against the wall. I hadn't thrown her hard enough to hurt her, but she was clearly startled. Her eyes widened in shock, and I used my forearm to pin her, pressing it against her throat.

"What are you doing?" exclaimed Ryan, peering back and forth between our faces. I shifted my stance slightly, still keeping the pressure on Camille.

"Furthering your education," I said pleasantly. "Sometimes places aren't as easy to secure as you think."

"You're crazy! You can't hurt a Moroi. If the guardians find out—"

"I'm not," I argued. I glanced toward her. "Am I hurting you? Are you in extreme pain?"

There was a hesitation; then she gave as much of a shake of her head as she could manage.

"Are you uncomfortable?"

A small nod.

"See?" I told Ryan. "Discomfort isn't the same thing as pain."

"You're insane. Let her go."

"I'm not done, Ry. Pay attention because here's the point: Danger can come from anywhere. Not just Strigoi—or guardians dressed up like Strigoi. Keep acting like an arrogant asshole who thinks he knows everything"—I pressed my arm in a little harder, still not enough to affect her breathing or cause real pain—"and you miss things. And those things can kill your Moroi."

"Okay, okay. Whatever. Please, stop it," he said. His voice wavered. There

was no more attitude. “You’re scaring her.”

“I’d be scared too, if my life was in your hands.”

The scent of cloves alerted me to Adrian’s presence. I also knew that Shane and a few others had come to watch. The other novices looked uncertain, like they wanted to pry me off but were afraid of getting Camille hurt. I knew I should let her go, but Ryan had just made me so angry. I needed to prove a point to him. I needed to get him back. And really, I didn’t even feel sorry for Camille either since I was sure she’d done her fair share of gossiping about me too.

“This is fascinating,” said Adrian, his voice as lazy as usual. “But I think you’ve made your point.”

“I don’t know,” I said. The tone of my voice managed to be both sweet and menacing at the same time. “I still don’t think Ryan gets it.”

“For God’s sake, Rose! I get it,” cried Ryan. “Just let her go.”

Adrian moved around me, going over to stand beside Camille. She and I were pressed close together, but he managed to squeeze in so that his face was in my line of sight, almost beside hers. He wore that goofy smirk he normally had, but there was something serious in his dark green eyes.

“Yes, little dhampir. Let her go. You’re done here.”

I wanted to tell Adrian to get away from me, that *I* would be the one to say when this was finished. Somehow, I couldn’t get the words out. A part of me was enraged at his interference. The other part of me thought he sounded . . . reasonable.

“Let her go,” he repeated.

My eyes were all over Adrian now, not Camille. Suddenly, all of me decided he sounded reasonable. Completely reasonable. I needed to let her go. I moved my arm and stepped away. With a gulp, Camille darted behind Ryan, using him like a shield. I saw now that she was on the verge of tears. Ryan simply looked stunned.

Adrian straightened up and made a dismissive gesture toward Ryan. “I’d get out of here—before you *really* annoy Rose.”

Ryan, Camille, and the others slowly backed off from us. Adrian put his arm around me and hurried me away toward the library. I felt weird, kind of like I was waking up, but then, with each step, things grew clearer and clearer. I pushed his arm off me and jerked away.

“You just used compulsion on me!” I exclaimed. “You made me let her go.”

“Someone needed to. You looked like you were seconds away from strangling her.”

“I wasn’t. And I wouldn’t have.” I pushed open the library door. “You had no right to do that to me. No right at all.” Compulsion—making people do what you wanted—was a skill all vampires had to a very small degree. Using it was considered immoral, and most couldn’t control it well enough to do any real damage. Spirit strengthened the ability, however, making both Adrian and Lissa very dangerous.

“And *you* had no right to tackle some poor girl in the hall just to soothe your own hurt pride.”

“Ryan had no right to say those things.”

“I don’t even know what ‘those things’ are, but unless I’ve misjudged your

age, you're too old to be throwing a tantrum over idle gossip."

"Throwing a—"

My words fell short as we reached Lissa working at a table. Her face and feelings told me trouble was coming. Eddie stood a couple feet away from her, leaning against a wall and watching the room. His eyes widened when he saw me, but he didn't say anything at my approach.

I slid into the chair opposite Lissa.

"Hey."

She looked up and sighed, then returned her attention to the textbook open in front of her. "I wondered when you'd turn up," she said. "Did you get suspended?"

Her words were calm and polite, but I could read her underlying feelings. Annoyed. Even a little angry.

"Not this time," I said. "Just got stuck with community service."

She said nothing, but the irate mood I sensed through the bond remained unchanged.

Now I sighed. "Okay, talk to me, Liss. I know you're mad."

Adrian looked at me, then her, and then me again. "I feel like I'm missing something here."

"Oh, great," I said. "You went and busted up my fight and didn't even know what it was about."

"Fight?" asked Lissa, confusion joining her anger.

"What happened?" repeated Adrian.

I nodded to Lissa. "Go ahead, tell him."

"Rose got tested earlier and refused to protect Christian." She shook her head, exasperated, and fixed me with an accusatory glare. "I can't believe you're seriously still mad enough to do something like that to him. It's childish."

Lissa had jumped to the same conclusions as the guardians. I sighed. "I didn't do it on purpose! I just sat through a whole hearing on this crap and told them the same thing."

"Then what happened?" she demanded. "Why *did* you do it?"

I hesitated, unsure what to say. My reluctance to talk didn't even have anything to do with Adrian and Eddie overhearing—though I certainly didn't want them to. The problem was more complex.

Dimitri had been right—there were people I could trust, and two of them I trusted unconditionally: him and Lissa. I'd already held back from telling him the truth. Would I—could I—do the same with her? Although she was mad, I knew without a doubt that Lissa would always support me and be there for me. But just like with Dimitri, I balked at the idea of telling my ghost story. Also just like with Dimitri, it left me in the same bind: crazy or incompetent?

Through our bond, I felt her mind, pure and clear. There was no taint, no darkness, or sign of madness—and yet, something tingled in the background. A slight stirring. Antidepressants took awhile to fully get into and out of one's system, but her magic was already waking up after one day. I thought back to my ghostly encounters, dredging up the memory of that sad, translucent Mason. How could I even begin to explain that to her? How could I bring up something as weird and fantastic as that when she'd been trying so hard to get

a little normality in her life and now faced the challenge of getting her magic under control?

No, I realized. I couldn't tell her. Not yet—especially when it suddenly occurred to me that there was still something else big I needed to let her know about.

"I froze," I said finally. "It's stupid. I'd been so cocky about being able to take out anyone, and then Stan . . ." I shrugged. "I don't know. I just couldn't react. It . . . it's really embarrassing. And him of all people."

Lissa studied me intently, looking for any sign of dishonesty. It hurt to think that she'd mistrust me, except . . . well, I *was* actually lying. As I'd told Dimitri, though, I could be a good liar when I wanted to be. Lissa couldn't tell.

"I wish I could read your mind," she mused.

"Come on," I said. "You know me. Do you really think I'd do this? Abandon Christian and make myself look stupid on purpose just to get back at my teachers?"

"No," she said finally. "You'd probably do it in a way where you wouldn't get caught."

"Dimitri said the same thing," I grumbled. "I'm glad everyone has so much faith in me."

"We do," she countered. "That's why all of this is so weird."

"Even I make mistakes." I put on my brash, overconfident face. "I know it's hard to believe—kind of surprises me myself—but I guess it has to happen. It's probably some kind of karmic way to balance out the universe. Otherwise, it wouldn't be fair to have one person so full of awesomeness."

Adrian, blessedly silent for a change, was watching the two of us talk, much as one would look back and forth at a tennis match. His eyes were narrowed slightly, and I suspected he was studying our auras.

Lissa rolled her eyes, but fortunately, the anger I'd felt earlier lightened. She believed me. Her gaze then lifted from my face to someone beyond me. I felt the happy, golden emotions that signaled Christian's presence.

"My loyal bodyguard returns," he declared, pulling up a chair. He glanced at Lissa. "Are you done yet?"

"Done with what?" she asked.

He inclined his head toward me. "Giving her a hard time about how she threw me into the deadly clutches of Alto."

Lissa blushed. She was already feeling a little bad about jumping on me, now that I'd defended myself sufficiently. Christian's flippant, knowing observation just made her feel more foolish.

"We were just talking about it, that's all."

Adrian yawned and slouched back in his chair. "Actually, I think I've figured it all out. This was a scam, wasn't it? A scam to scare me off since I'm always talking about you being my guardian. You thought if you pretended to be a bad guardian, I wouldn't want you. Well, it's not going to work, so there's no point in risking anyone else's life."

I was grateful he didn't mention the incident in the hall. Ryan had absolutely been out of line, but as more time passed, it became harder and harder for me to believe I'd snapped like that. It was like something that had happened to someone else, something that I'd simply been watching. Of

course, I seemed to be snapping over everything lately. I'd been mad about getting Christian, mad about the guardians' accusation, mad about—

Oh, right. It was probably time for me to drop the bomb.

"So, um . . . there's something you guys should know."

Four sets of eyes—even Eddie's—turned to me.

"What's wrong?" asked Lissa.

There was really no easy way to tell them, so I just pushed forward. "Well, it turns out that Victor Dashkov was never found guilty of what he did to us. He's just been locked up. But they're finally going to have an official trial—in another week or so."

Lissa's reaction to hearing his name was similar to mine. Shock shot through the bond, followed immediately by fear. A slide show of images flashed through her mind. The way Victor's sick game had made her question her sanity. The torture his henchman had subjected her to. The bloody state she'd found Christian in after he'd been attacked by Victor's hounds. She clenched her fists on the table, knuckles going white. Christian couldn't sense her reaction the way I could, but he didn't need to. He moved his hand over hers. She barely noticed.

"But . . . but . . ." She took a deep, steadying breath, fighting to stay calm. "How could he not be guilty already? Everyone knows. . . . They all saw. . . ."

"It's the law. They supposedly have to give him a fighting chance."

There was confusion all over her, and slowly, she came to the same realization that I had last night with Dimitri. "So . . . wait . . . are you saying there's a chance they might not find him guilty?"

I looked into her wide, frightened eyes and couldn't bring myself to tell her. Apparently, my face said it all.

Christian slammed his fist against the table. "This is bullshit." Several people at other tables glanced over at his outburst.

"This is politics," said Adrian. "People in power never have to play by the same rules."

"But he nearly killed Rose and Christian!" cried Lissa. "And he kidnapped me! How can there be any question?"

Lissa's emotions were all over the place. Fear. Sorrow. Anger. Outrage. Confusion. Helplessness. I didn't want her delving into those dark feelings and hoped desperately that she'd grow calm again. Slowly, steadily, she did—but then *I* started getting angry again. It was like Ryan all over.

"It's a formality, I'm sure," said Adrian. "When all the evidence is in, there probably isn't going to be much of a debate."

"That's the thing," I said bitterly. "They're not going to have all the evidence. We aren't allowed to go."

"What?" exclaimed Christian. "Then who's testifying?"

"The other guardians who were there. We apparently can't be trusted to keep the whole thing quiet. The queen doesn't want the world to know that one of her precious royals might have done something wrong."

Lissa didn't seem to take offense at me trashing royals. "But we're the reason he's on trial."

Christian stood up, glancing around as though Victor might be in the library. "I'm going to go take care of this right now."

“Sure,” said Adrian. “I bet going in there and kicking down the door will change their minds. Take Rose with you, and you guys’ll make a really good impression.”

“Yeah?” asked Christian, clenching the back of his chair and fixing Adrian with a stormy glare. “You have a better idea?”

Lissa’s calmness began to waver again. “If Victor was free, would he come after us again?”

“If he gets loose again, he won’t stay that way for long,” I said. “I’ll make sure of it.”

“Careful there,” said Adrian. He seemed to find all of this funny. “Even you couldn’t get away with a royal assassination.”

I started to tell him that I’d practice on him first, but then Eddie’s sharp voice interrupted my thoughts.

“Rose.”

Instinct born from years of training instantly kicked into place. I looked up and immediately saw what he’d noticed. Emil had just entered the library and was scanning for novices, taking notes. I shot up out of my chair, taking a position not far from Eddie that gave me a view of Christian and most of the library. Damn it. I had to get a grip, or I’d end up proving Ryan right. Between my brawl in the hall and now this Victor thing, I was completely neglecting my guardian duties. I might not even need Mason to fail this.

Emil hadn’t seen me sitting and socializing. He strolled by, glanced at us, and made a few notes before heading off to scout the rest of the library. Relieved at escaping my close call, I tried to gain control of myself. It was hard. That black mood had seized me again, and listening to Lissa and Christian rage over Victor’s trial wasn’t really helping me relax. I wanted to go over there and weigh in. I wanted to yell and rant and share my own frustration. But that wasn’t a luxury I had as a guardian. My first duty was to protect Moroi and not give into my own impulses. Over and over, I repeated the guardian mantra: *They come first*.

Those words were really starting to annoy me.

SEVEN

WHEN THE FIRST WARNING for curfew came around, the Moroi packed their things up. Adrian took off right away, but Lissa and Christian took their time walking back to the dorm. They held hands and kept their heads close together, whispering about something that I could have "spied" on if I'd gone inside Lissa's head. They were still outraged over the Victor news.

I gave them their privacy and kept my distance, scouting while Eddie walked off to their side. Since there were more Moroi than dhampirs on campus, the Moroi actually had two side-by-side dorms. Lissa and Christian lived in different ones. The two of them stopped when they came to the spot outside the buildings where the path through the quad split. They kissed goodbye, and I did my best to do the guardian seeing-without-actually-seeing thing. Lissa called goodbye to me and then headed off to her dorm with Eddie. I followed Christian to his.

If I'd been guarding Adrian or someone like him, I would probably have had to put up with sexual jokes about us sleeping near each other for the next six weeks. But Christian treated me in the casual, brusque way one might a sister. He cleared a spot on the floor for me, and by the time he returned from brushing his teeth, I'd made myself a cozy bed out of blankets. He flipped off the lights and climbed into his own bed.

After several quiet moments, I asked, "Christian?"

"This is the time when we sleep, Rose."

I yawned. "Believe me, I want that too. But I have a question."

"Is it about Victor? Because I need to sleep, and that's just going to piss me off again."

"No, it's about something else."

"Okay, shoot."

"Why didn't you make fun of me over what happened with Stan? Everyone else is trying to figure out if I messed up or did it on purpose. Lissa gave me a hard time. Adrian did a little. And the guardians . . . well, never mind about them. But you didn't say anything. I figured you'd be the first one with a snappy comment."

More silence fell, and I hoped he was thinking about his answer and not falling asleep.

"There was no point in giving you a hard time," he said at last. "I know you didn't do it on purpose."

"Why not? I mean, not that I'm contradicting you—because I *didn't* do it on purpose—but why are you so sure?"

"Because of our conversation in culinary science. And because of the way you are. I saw you in Spokane. Anyone who did what you did to save us . . . well, you wouldn't do something childish like this."

"Wow. Thanks. I . . . well, that means a lot." Christian believed me when no one else did. "You're like the first person who actually believes I just messed up without any ulterior motives."

"Well," he said, "I don't believe that either."

"Believe what? That I messed up? Why not?"

"Weren't you just listening? I saw you in Spokane. Someone like you doesn't mess up or freeze." I started to give him the same line I'd given the guardians, that killing Strigoi didn't make me invincible, but he cut me off: "Plus, I saw your face out there."

"Out . . . on the quad?"

"Yeah." Several more quiet moments passed. "I don't know what happened, but the way you looked . . . that wasn't the look of someone trying to get back at a person. It wasn't the look of someone blanking out at Alto's attack either. It was something different. . . . I don't know. But you were completely consumed by something else—and honestly? Your expression? Kind of scary."

"Yet . . . you aren't giving me a hard time over that either."

"Not my business. If it was big enough to take you over like that, then it must be serious. But if push comes to shove, I feel safe with you, Rose. I know you'd protect me if there was really a Strigoi there." He yawned. "Okay. Now that I've bared my soul, can we please go to bed? Maybe you don't need beauty sleep, but some of us aren't that lucky."

I let him sleep and soon gave into exhaustion myself. I'd had a long day and was still short on rest from the previous night. Once heavily asleep, I began to dream. As I did, I felt the telltale signs of one of Adrian's contrived dreams.

"Oh no," I groaned.

I stood in a garden in the middle of summer. The air was heavy and humid, and sunshine beat down on me in golden waves. Flowers of every color bloomed around me, and the air was heavy with the scent of lilacs and roses. Bees and butterflies danced from blossom to blossom. I wore jeans and a linen tank top. My *nazar*, a small blue eye made of glass that allegedly warded off evil, hung around my neck. I also wore a beaded bracelet with a cross, called a *chotki*, on my wrist. It was a Dragomir heirloom Lissa had given me. I rarely wore jewelry in my daily duties, but it always showed up in these dreams.

"Where are you?" I called. "I know you're here."

Adrian stepped around from behind an apple tree that was thick with pink and white flowers. He wore jeans—something I'd never seen him in before. They looked good and were undoubtedly a designer brand. A dark green cotton T-shirt—also very simple—covered his upper body, and the sunlight brought out highlights of gold and chestnut in his brown hair.

"I told you to stay out of my dreams," I said, putting my hands on my hips.

He gave me his lazy smile. "But how else are we supposed to talk? You didn't seem very friendly earlier."

"Maybe if you didn't use compulsion on people, you'd have more friends."

"I had to save you from yourself. Your aura was like a storm cloud."

"Okay, for once, can we please not talk about auras and my impending doom?"

The look in his eyes told me he was actually really interested in that, but he let it go. "Okay. We can talk about other things."

"But I don't want to talk at all! I want to sleep."

"You are sleeping." Adrian smiled and walked over to study a flowering vine that was winding up a post. It had orange and yellow flowers shaped like trumpets. He gently ran his fingers over one of the flowers' edges. "This was my grandmother's garden."

"Great," I said, making myself comfortable against the apple tree. It looked like we could be here for a while. "Now I get to hear your family history."

"Hey, she was a cool lady."

"I'm sure she was. Can I go yet?"

His eyes were still on the vine's blossoms. "You shouldn't knock Moroi family trees. You don't know anything about your father. For all you know, we could be related."

"Would that mean you'd leave me alone?"

Strolling back over to me, he switched subjects as though there'd been no interruption. "Nah, don't worry. I think we come from different trees. Isn't your dad some Turkish guy anyway?"

"Yeah, according to my—Hey, are you staring at my chest?"

He was studying me closely, but his eyes were no longer on my face. I crossed my arms over my chest and glared.

"I'm staring at your shirt," he said. "The color is all wrong."

Reaching out, he touched the strap. Like ink spreading across paper, the ivory fabric turned the same shade of rich indigo as the vine's blossoms. He narrowed his eyes like an expert artist studying his work.

"How'd you do that?" I exclaimed.

"It's my dream. Hmm. You're not a blue person. Well, at least not in the color sense. Let's try this." The blue lit up into a brilliant crimson. "Yes, that's it. Red's your color. Red like a rose, like a sweet, sweet Rose."

"Oh man," I said. "I didn't know you could kick into crazy mode even in dreams." He never got as dark and depressed as Lissa had last year, but spirit definitely made him weird sometimes.

He stepped back and threw his arms out. "I'm always crazy around you, Rose. Here, I'm going to write an impromptu poem for you." He tipped his head back and shouted to the sky:

"Rose is in red

But never in blue
Sharp as a thorn
Fights like one too."

Adrian dropped his arms and looked at me expectantly.

"How can a thorn fight?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Art doesn't have to make sense, little dhampir. Besides, I'm supposed to be crazy, right?"

"Not the craziest I've ever seen."

"Well," he said, pacing over to study some hydrangeas, "I'll work on that."

I started to ask again about when I could go "back" to sleep, but our exchange brought something to my mind.

"Adrian . . . how do you know if you're crazy or not?"

He turned from the flowers, a smile on his face. I could tell he was about to make a joke, but then he looked at me more closely. The smile faded, and he turned unusually serious.

"Do you think you're crazy?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said, looking down at the ground. I was barefoot, and sharp blades of grass tickled my feet. "I've been . . . seeing things."

"People who are crazy rarely question whether they're crazy," he said wisely.

I sighed and looked back up at him. "That doesn't really help me."

He walked back over to me and rested a hand on my shoulder. "I don't think you're crazy, Rose. I think you've been through a lot, though."

I frowned. "What's that mean?"

"It means I don't think you're crazy."

"Thanks. That clears things up. You know, these dreams are *really* starting to bug me."

"Lissa doesn't mind them," he said.

"You visit hers too? Do you seriously have no boundaries?"

"Nah, hers are instructional. She wants to learn how to do this."

"Great. So I'm just the lucky one who gets to put up with your sexual harassment."

He actually looked hurt. "I really wish you wouldn't act like I'm evil incarnate."

"Sorry. I just haven't had much reason to believe you can do anything useful."

"Right. As opposed to your cradle-robbing mentor. I don't really see you making much progress with him."

I took a step back and narrowed my eyes. "Leave Dimitri out of this."

"I will when you stop acting like he's perfect. Correct me if I'm wrong, but he's one of the people who hid the trial from you, right?"

I looked away. "That's not important right now. Besides, he had his reasons."

"Yeah, which apparently didn't involve being open with you *or* fighting to get you there. Whereas me . . ." He shrugged. "I could get you into the trial."

"You?" I asked with a harsh laugh. "How are you going to pull that off? Have a smoke break with the judge? Use compulsion on the queen and half the royals at court?"

“You shouldn’t be so quick to slam people who can help you. Just wait.” He placed a light kiss on my forehead that I tried to wiggle away from. “But for now, go get some rest.”

The garden faded, and I fell back into the normal blackness of sleep.

EIGHT

FOR THE NEXT FEW DAYS, I followed Christian around without incident. And as I did, I found myself growing more and more impatient.

For one thing, I was discovering that a lot of being a guardian was waiting around. I'd always known that, but the reality was harder than I'd realized. Guardians were absolutely essential for when Strigoi decided to attack. But those Strigoi attacks? They were generally rare. Time could pass—*years* could pass—without a guardian ever having to engage in any sort of conflict. While my instructors certainly wouldn't make us wait that long during this exercise, they nonetheless wanted to teach us patience and how important it was *not* to slack just because there'd been no danger in a while.

We were also being held to the strictest conditions a guardian could be in: always standing and always being formal. More often than not, guardians who lived with Moroi families behaved casually in their homes and did ordinary things like reading or watching TV—while still staying perfectly aware of any threats. We couldn't always expect that, though, so we had to practice the hard way while in school.

My patience level didn't do so well with all this waiting, but my frustration was more than just restlessness. I was desperate to prove myself, to make amends for not having reacted when Stan attacked. I'd had no further Mason sightings and had decided that what I'd seen really had been fatigue- and stress-induced. That made me happy, because those were much better reasons than being crazy or inept.

But certain things were not making me happy. When Christian and I met up with Lissa after class one day, I could feel worry and fear and anger radiating off of her. It was only the bond that clued me in, though. To all outside appearances, she looked fine. Eddie and Christian, who were talking about

something with each other, didn't notice a thing.

I moved close and put an arm around her as we walked. "It's okay. Everything's going to be okay." I knew what was bothering her. Victor.

We'd decided that Christian—despite his willingness to "take care of things"—probably wasn't the best choice to go see about us getting into Victor's trial. So Lissa had played diplomat the other day and very politely spoken to Alberta about the possibility of us testifying. Alberta had told her, equally politely, that it was out of the question.

"I figured if we just explained things—why it was so important—they'd let us go," she murmured to me. "Rose, I can't sleep. . . . I just keep thinking about it. What if he gets loose? What if they really set him free?"

Her voice trembled, and there was an old vulnerability there that I hadn't seen in a long time. That sort of thing usually set off my warning bells, but this time, it triggered a weird rush of memories, of times past when Lissa had depended on me so much. I was happy to see how strong she'd become and wanted to make sure she stayed that way. I tightened my arm, hard to do while still walking.

"He won't get loose," I said fiercely. "We'll get to court. I'll make sure of it. You know I'd never let anything happen to you."

She leaned her head against my shoulder, a small smile on her face. "That's what I love about you. You have no idea how you'll get us to court, but you still push forward anyway to make me feel better."

"Is it working?"

"Yes."

The worry still lurked in her, but her amusement dampened its effects a little. Plus, despite her teasing me about my bold promise, my words really had reassured her.

Unfortunately, we soon found out that Lissa had other reasons to be frustrated. She was waiting for the medication to fade from her system and allow her full access to her magic. It was there—we could both sense it—but she was having trouble touching it. Three days had passed, and nothing had changed for her. I felt for her, but my biggest concern was her mental state—which thus far had stayed clear.

"I don't know what's going on," she complained. We had almost reached the commons. Lissa and Christian had plans to watch a movie. I half-wondered how difficult it would be for me to watch the movie and be on alert. "It seems like I should be able to do *something*, but I still can't. I'm stuck."

"That might not be a bad thing," I pointed out, moving away from Lissa so I could scan the path ahead.

She shot me a rueful look. "You're such a worrier. I thought that was my job."

"Hey, it's my job to look out for you."

"Actually, it's my job," said Eddie, in a rare show of joking.

"Neither of you should be worrying," she argued. "Not about this."

Christian slipped his arm around her waist. "You're more impatient than Rose here. All you need to do is—"

It was déjà vu.

Stan leapt out from a copse of trees and reached for Lissa, wrapping his arm

around her torso and jerking her toward him. My body responded instantly, no hesitation whatsoever as I moved to "save" her. The only problem was that Eddie had responded instantly too, and he was closer, which put him there ahead of me. I circled, trying to get in on the action, but the way the two were squaring off blocked me from being effective.

Eddie came at Stan from the side, fierce and swift, pulling Stan's arm away from Lissa with a strength nearly powerful enough to rip it out of the socket. Eddie's wiry frame often hid how muscular he really was. Stan's hand caught the side of Eddie's face, nails digging in, but it was enough so that Lissa could wriggle free and run to join Christian behind me. With her out of the way, I moved off to the side, hoping to assist Eddie—but there was no need. Without missing a beat, he grabbed Stan and threw him down to the ground. Half a breath later, Eddie's practice stake was poised right above Stan's heart.

Stan laughed, genuinely pleased. "Nice job, Castile."

Eddie withdrew the stake and helped his instructor up. With the action gone, I could now see how bruised and blotched Stan's face was. Attacks for us novices might be few and far between, but our guardians were picking fights daily during this exercise. All of them were taking a lot of abuse, but they handled it with grace and good humor.

"Thank you, sir," said Eddie. He looked pleased but not conceited.

"I'd be faster and stronger if I were Strigoi, of course, but I swear, you could have rivaled one with your speed there." Stan glanced at Lissa. "You okay?"

"Fine," she said, face aglow. I could sense that she'd actually enjoyed the excitement. Her adrenaline was running high.

Stan's smiling face disappeared as he turned his attention on me. "And you —what were you doing?"

I stared, aghast at his harsh tone. It was what he'd said last time too.

"What do you mean?" I exclaimed. "I didn't freeze or anything this time! I was ready to back him up, looking for a chance to join in."

"Yes," he agreed. "That's exactly the problem. You were so eager to get a punch in that you forgot that you had two Moroi behind you. They might as well have not existed as far as you were concerned. You're out in the open, and you had your back to them."

I strode forward and glared at him, unconcerned about propriety. "That is *not* fair. If we were in the real world and a Strigoi attacked, you cannot tell me that another guardian wouldn't jump in and do everything they could to take that Strigoi down as quickly possible."

"You're probably right," Stan said. "But you weren't thinking about eliminating the threat efficiently. You weren't thinking about your exposed Moroi. You were thinking about how quickly you could do something exciting and redeem yourself."

"Wh-what? Aren't you making a few leaps there? You're grading me on what you *think* was my motivation. How can you be sure what I'm thinking?" I didn't even know half the time.

"Instinct," he replied mysteriously. He took out a small pad of paper and made some notes on it. I narrowed my eyes, wishing I could see through the notepad and discern what he was writing about me. When he finished, he slipped the pad back in his coat and nodded at all of us. "See you later."

We watched him walk across the snowy grounds toward the gym where dhampirs trained. My mouth was hanging open, and I couldn't even get any words out at first. When did it end with these people? I was getting burned again and again on stupid technicalities that had nothing to do with how I'd actually perform in the real world.

"That was not even fair. How can he judge me on what he thinks I was thinking?"

Eddie shrugged as we continued our journey toward the dorm. "He can think whatever he wants. He's our instructor."

"Yeah, but he's going to give me another bad mark! Field experience is pointless if it can't really show how we'd do against Strigoi. I can't believe this. I'm good—I'm really good. How on earth can I be failing this?"

Nobody had an actual answer for that, but Lissa noted uncomfortably, "Well . . . whether he was fair or unfair, he had one thing right: You were great, Eddie."

I glanced over at Eddie and felt bad that I was letting my own drama take away from his success. I was pissed off—*really* pissed off—but Stan's wrongness was my problem to deal with. Eddie had performed brilliantly, and everyone praised him so much on the walk back that I could see a blush creeping over his cheeks. Or maybe that was just the cold. Regardless, I was happy for him.

We settled into the lounge, pleased to find no one else had claimed it—and that it was warm and toasty. Each of the dorms had a few of these lounges, and all were stocked with movies and games and lots of comfy chairs and couches. They were only available for student use at certain times. On weekends, they were pretty much open the whole time, but on weekdays, they had limited hours—presumably to encourage us to do our homework.

Eddie and I assessed the room and made a plan, then took up our positions. Standing against the wall, I eyed the couch Lissa and Christian were sprawled out upon with considerable envy.

I'd thought the movie would distract me from being on alert, but actually, it was my own churning feelings that kept my mind spinning. I couldn't believe Stan had said what he'd said. He'd even admitted that in the heat of battle, any guardian would be trying to get into the fight. His argument about me having ulterior, glory-seeking motives was absurd. I wondered if I was in serious danger of failing this field experience. Surely, so long as I passed, they wouldn't take me from Lissa after graduation? Alberta and Dimitri had spoken like this was all just an experiment to give Lissa and me new training, but suddenly, an anxious, paranoid part of me began to wonder. Eddie was doing a great job of protecting her. Maybe they wanted to see how well she could work with other guardians. Maybe they were worried that I was only good at protecting her and not other Moroi—I'd let Mason die, after all, right? Maybe the real test here was to see if I needed to be replaced. After all, who was I, really? An expendable novice. She was the Dragomir princess. She would always have protection—and it didn't have to be me. The bond was pointless if I ultimately proved incompetent.

Adrian's entrance put my frantic paranoia on hold. He slipped into the darkened room, winking as he flounced into an armchair near me. I had

figured it was only a matter of time before he would surface. I think we were his only entertainment on campus. Or maybe not, judging from the strong smell of alcohol around him.

"Are you sober?" I asked him when the movie ended.

"Sober enough. What have you guys been up to?"

Adrian hadn't visited my dreams since the one in the garden. He'd also laid off on some of his outrageous flirting. Most of his appearances with us were to work with Lissa or to ease his boredom.

We recapped our encounter with Stan for him, playing up Eddie's bravery and not mentioning my dressing-down.

"Nice work," said Adrian. "Looks like you got a battle scar too." He pointed to the side of Eddie's face where three red marks glared back at us. I remembered Stan's nails hitting Eddie during the struggle to free Lissa.

Eddie lightly touched his cheek. "I can barely feel it."

Lissa leaned forward and studied him. "You got that protecting me."

"I got that trying to pass my field experience," he teased. "Don't worry about it."

And that's when it happened. I saw it seize her, that compassion and undeniable urge to help others that so often filled her. She couldn't stand to see pain, couldn't stand to sit by if she could do something. I felt the power build up in her, a glorious and swirling feeling that made my toes tingle. I was experiencing how it affected her. It was fire and bliss. Intoxicating. She reached out and touched Eddie's face. . . .

And the marks vanished.

She dropped her hand, and the euphoria of spirit faded from both of us.

"Son of a bitch," breathed Adrian. "You weren't kidding about that." He peered at Eddie's cheek. "Not a goddamned trace of it."

Lissa had stood up and now sank back to the couch. She leaned her head back against it and closed her eyes. "I did it. I can still do it."

"Of course you can," said Adrian dismissively. "Now you have to show *me* how to do it."

She opened her eyes. "It's not that easy."

"Oh, I see," he said in an exaggerated tone. "You grill me like crazy about how to see auras and walk in dreams, but now you won't reveal your trade secrets."

"It's not a 'won't,'" she argued. "It's a 'can't.'"

"Well, cousin, *try*." Then suddenly he raked his nails across *his* hand and drew blood.

"Jesus Christ!" I yelped. "Are you insane?" Who was I kidding? Of course he was.

Lissa reached out and held his hand, and just like before, she healed the skin. Elation filled her, but my mood suddenly dropped without any real cause.

The two of them launched into a discussion I couldn't follow, using standard magical terms as well as some terms I was pretty sure they'd invented on the spot. Judging from Christian's face, it looked like he didn't understand either, and it soon became clear that Adrian and Lissa had forgotten us in their zeal over the mystery of spirit.

Christian finally stood up, looking bored. “Come on, Rose. If I wanted to listen to this, I’d be back in class. I’m hungry.”

Lissa glanced up. “Dinner’s not for another hour and a half.”

“Feeder,” he said. “I haven’t had mine today.”

He planted a kiss on Lissa’s cheek and then left. I followed alongside him. It had started snowing again, and I glared at the flakes accusingly as they drifted down around us. When it had first started snowing in early December, I’d been excited. Now this white stuff was getting pretty damned old. As it had a few nights ago, though, being out in such harsh weather defused my mood a little, the cold air kind of snapping me out of it. With each step closer to the feeders, I felt myself calming down.

A “feeder” was what we called humans who volunteered to be regular sources of blood for Moroi. Unlike Strigoi, who killed the victims they drank from, Moroi took only small quantities each day and didn’t have to kill the donor. These humans lived for the high they got from vampire bites and seemed perfectly happy to spend their lives that way and separate from normal human society. It was weird but necessary for Moroi. The school usually had a feeder or two in the Moroi dorms for overnight hours, but for most of the day, students had to go to the commons to get their daily fix.

As I continued walking, taking in the sights of white trees, white fences, and white boulders, something else white in the landscape caught my attention. Well, it wasn’t white exactly. There was color—pale, washed-out color.

I came to an abrupt halt and felt my eyes go wide. Mason stood on the other side of the quad, nearly blending in with a tree and a post. *No*, I thought. I’d convinced myself that this was over, but there he was, looking at me with that sorrowful, phantom face. He pointed, off toward the back of campus. I glanced that way but again had no clue what to look for. Turning back to him, I could only stare, fear twisting within me.

An icy-cold hand touched the side of my neck, and I spun around. It was Christian.

“What’s up?” he asked.

I looked back to where I’d seen Mason. He was gone, of course. I squeezed my eyes shut a moment and sighed. Then, turning back to Christian, I kept walking and said, “Nothing.”

Christian usually always had some witty stream of comments whenever we were together, but he was silent as we made the rest of our journey. I was consumed with my own thoughts and worries about Mason, so I had little to say either. This sighting had only lasted a few seconds. Considering how hard it was to see out there, it seemed more than likely that he’d been a trick of the eye, right? I tried to convince myself of this for the rest of the walk. When we entered the commons and escaped the cold, it finally hit me that something was amiss with Christian.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, trying not to think about Mason. “Are you okay?”

“Fine,” he said.

“The way you just said that proves you aren’t fine.”

He ignored me as we went to the feeders’ room. It was busier than I’d expected, and all of the little cubicles that feeders sat in were filled with Moroi. Brandon Lazar was one of them. As he fed, I caught a glimpse of a

faded green bruise on his cheek and recalled that I never had found out who had beaten him up. Christian checked in with the Moroi at the door and then stood in the waiting area until he was called. I racked my brain, trying to figure out what could have caused Christian's bad mood.

"What's the matter? Didn't you like the movie?"

No answer.

"Grossed out by Adrian's self-mutilation?" Giving Christian a hard time was a guilty pleasure. I could do this all night.

No answer.

"Are you—Oh."

It hit me then. I was surprised I hadn't thought of this before.

"Are you upset that Lissa wanted to talk magic with Adrian?"

He shrugged, which told me all I needed to know.

"Come on, she doesn't like magic more than she likes you. It's just this thing with her, you know? She spent all these years thinking she couldn't do real magic, and then found out she could—except it was this wacky, completely unpredictable kind. She's just trying to understand it."

"I know," he said tightly, staring across the expansive room without actually focusing on any of the people. "That's not the problem."

"Then why . . ." I let my words fade as another revelation hit me. "You're jealous of Adrian."

Christian fixed his ice-blue eyes on me, and I could tell I'd hit the mark. "I'm not jealous. I'm just—"

"—feeling insecure over the fact that your girlfriend is spending a lot of time with a rich and reasonably cute guy whom she might like. Or, as we like to call it, jealous."

He turned away from me, clearly annoyed. "The honeymoon might be over between us, Rose. Damn it. Why are these people taking so long?"

"Look," I said, shifting my stance. My feet hurt after so much standing. "Didn't you listen to my romantic speech the other day about being in Lissa's heart? She's crazy about you. You're the only one she wants, and believe me, I can say that with 100 percent certainty. If there was anyone else, I'd know."

The hint of a smile crossed his lips. "You're her best friend. You could be covering for her."

I scoffed. "Not if she were with Adrian. I assure you, she has no interest in him, thank God—at least not romantically."

"He can be persuasive, though. He knows how to work his compulsion. . . ."

"He's not using it on her, though. I don't even know if he can—I think they cancel each other out. Besides, haven't you been paying attention? *I'm* the unfortunate object of Adrian's attention."

"Really?" asked Christian, clearly surprised. Guys were so oblivious to this sort of stuff. "I know he flirts—"

"And shows up in my dreams uninvited. Seeing as I can't get away, it gives him the perfect chance to torture me with his so-called charm and attempt to be romantic."

He turned suspicious. "He shows up in Lissa's dreams too."

Shoot. Shouldn't have mentioned the dreams. What had Adrian said? "Those are instructional. I don't think you need to worry."

"People wouldn't stare if she showed up at some party with Adrian."

"Ah," I said. "So this is what it's really about. You think you're going to drag her down?"

"I'm not that good . . . at those kinds of social things," he admitted in a rare show of vulnerability. "And I think Adrian's got a better reputation than me."

"Are you joking?"

"Come on, Rose. Drinking and smoking aren't even in the same league as people thinking you're going to turn Strigoi. I saw the way everyone acted when she took me to dinners and stuff at the ski lodge. I'm a liability. She's the only representative from her family. She's going to spend the rest of her life tied up with politics, trying to get in good with people. Adrian could do a lot more for her than I could."

I resisted the urge to literally shake some sense into him. "I can see where you're coming from, but there's one flaw in your airtight logic. *There's nothing going on with her and Adrian*."

He looked away and didn't say anything else. I suspected his feelings went beyond her simply being with another guy. As he'd even admitted, he had a whole tangle of insecurity about Lissa. Being with her had done wonders for his attitude and sociability, but at the end of the day, he still had trouble dealing with coming from a "tainted" family. He still worried he wasn't good enough for her.

"Rose is right," an unwelcome voice said behind us. Preparing my best glare, I turned around to face Jesse. Naturally, Ralf lurked nearby. Jesse's assigned novice, Dean, stood watch at the doorway. They apparently had a more formal bodyguard relationship. Jesse and Ralf hadn't been in line when we arrived, but they'd apparently wandered up and heard enough to piece together some of our conversation. "You're still royal. You have every right to be with her."

"Wow, talk about a turnaround," I said. "Weren't you guys just telling me the other day how Christian was about to turn Strigoi at any moment? I'd watch your necks, if I were you. He looks dangerous."

Jesse shrugged. "Hey, you said he was clean, and if anyone knows Strigoi, it's you. Besides, we're actually starting to think that rebellious Ozera nature is a good thing."

I eyed him suspiciously, assuming there must be some trick here. Yet he looked sincere, like he really was convinced Christian was safe.

"Thanks," said Christian, a slight sneer curling his lips. "Now that you've endorsed me and my family, I can finally get on with my life. It's the only thing that's been holding me back."

"I'm serious," said Jesse. "The Ozeras have been kind of quiet lately, but they used to be one of the strongest families out there. They could be again—especially you. You're not afraid to do things that you aren't supposed to. We like that. If you'd get over your antisocial bullshit, you could make the right friends and go far. Might make you stop worrying so much about Lissa."

Christian and I exchanged glances. "What are you getting at?" he asked.

Jesse smiled and cast a covert glance around us. "Some of us have been getting together. We've formed a group—sort of a way for those of us from the *better* families to unite, you know? Things are kind of crazy, what with those

Strigoi attacks last month and people not knowing what to do. There's also talk about making us fight and finding new ways to hand out the guardians." He said it with a sneer, and I bristled at hearing guardians described like objects. "Too many non-royals are trying to take charge."

"Why is that a problem if their ideas are good?" I demanded.

"Their ideas *aren't* good. They don't know their place. Some of us have started thinking of ways to protect ourselves from that and look out for each other. I think you'd like what we've learned to do. After all, *we're* the ones who need to keep making decisions, not dhampirs and nobody Moroi. We're the elite. The best. Join us, and there are things we could do to help you with Lissa."

I couldn't help it. I laughed. Christian simply looked disgusted.

"I take back what I said earlier," he told them. "*This* is what I've been waiting for my whole life. An invitation to join your tree house club."

Ralf, big and lumbering, took a step forward. "Don't screw with us. This is serious."

Christian sighed. "Then don't screw with *me*. If you really think I want to hang out with you guys and try to make things even better for Moroi who are already spoiled and selfish, then you're even stupider than I thought you were. And *that* was pretty stupid."

Anger and embarrassment filled both Jesse and Ralf's faces, but mercifully, Christian's name was called just then. He seemed considerably cheered as we walked across the room. Nothing like a confrontation with two assholes to make you feel better about your love life.

Christian's assigned feeder tonight was a woman named Alice, who was the oldest feeder on campus. Most Moroi preferred young donors, but Christian, being the twisted person he was, liked her because she was kind of senile. She wasn't *that* old—sixties—but too many vampire endorphins over her life had permanently affected her.

"Rose," she said, turning her dazed blue eyes on me. "You aren't usually with Christian. Have you and Vasilisa had a fight?"

"Nope," I said. "Just getting a change of scenery."

"Scenery," she murmured, glancing at a nearby window. Moroi kept windows tinted to block out light, and I doubted a human could see anything. "The scenery is always changing. Have you noticed that?"

"Not our scenery," said Christian, sitting beside her. "That snow's not going anywhere. Not for a few months."

She sighed and gave him an exasperated look. "I wasn't talking about the scenery."

Christian gave me an amused smile, then leaned over and sank his teeth into her neck. Her expression grew slack, all talk of scenery or whatever she'd meant forgotten as he drank from her. I lived around vampires so much that I didn't even think about their fangs half the time. Most Moroi were actually pretty good at hiding them. It was only in moments like these that I remembered the power a vampire had.

Usually, when I watched a vampire feed, I was reminded of when Lissa and I had run away from the Academy, and I'd let her feed off of me. I'd never reached the crazy addiction levels of a feeder, but I had enjoyed the brief

high. I used to want it in a way I could never admit to anybody. In our world, only humans gave blood. Dhampirs who did it were cheap and humiliated.

Now, when I watched a vampire drink, I no longer thought about how good the high felt. Instead, I flashed back to that room in Spokane where Isaiah, our Strigoi captor, had fed off of Eddie. The feelings that stirred up in me were anything but good. Eddie had suffered horribly, and I hadn't been able to do anything except sit there and watch. Grimacing, I turned away from Christian and Alice.

When we left the feeders' room, Christian looked more vibrant and upbeat. "The weekend's here, Rose. No classes—and you get your day off."

"No," I said, having almost forgotten. Damn it. Why did he have to remind me? I was almost starting to feel better after the Stan incident. I sighed. "I have community service."

NINE

WITH SO MANY MOROI tracing their roots back to Eastern Europe, Orthodox Christianity was the dominant religion on campus. Other religions were represented too, and I'd say all in all, only about half of the student body attended any sort of services regularly. Lissa was one such student. She went to church every Sunday because she believed. Christian also attended. He did it because she went and because it made him look good and seem less likely to become Strigoi. Since Strigoi couldn't enter holy ground, regular church service provided a small front of respectability for him.

When I wasn't sleeping in, I showed up at church for the social aspect. Lissa and my friends usually hung out and did something fun afterward, so church made for a good meeting spot. If God minded me using his chapel as a way to further my social life, He hadn't let me know. Either that, or He was biding his time before punishing me.

When the service ended that Sunday, however, I had to stick around the chapel, because that was where my community service was going to happen. When the place had cleared out, I was surprised to see one other person had lingered with me: Dimitri.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"Thought you might need some help. I hear the priest wants to do a lot of housecleaning."

"Yeah, but you're not the one being punished here. And this is your day off too. We—well, everyone else—spent the whole week battling it out, but you guys were the ones picking the fights the whole time." In fact, I noticed now that Dimitri had a couple bruises too—though not nearly as many as Stan had. It had been a long week for everyone, and it was only the first of six.

"What else would I do today?"

“I could think of a hundred other things,” I noted dryly. “There’s probably a John Wayne movie on somewhere that you haven’t seen.”

He shook his head. “No, there isn’t. I’ve seen them all. Look—the priest is waiting for us.”

I turned around. Sure enough. Father Andrew stood at the front, watching us expectantly. He’d taken off the rich robes he’d worn during service and now stood in simple slacks and a button down shirt. He looked like he was ready to work too, and I wondered whatever happened to Sunday being a day of rest.

As Dimitri and I approached to get our assignments, I pondered what could have actually made Dimitri stay here in the first place. Surely he hadn’t *really* wanted to work on his day off. I wasn’t used to puzzles with him. His intentions were usually straightforward, and I had to assume there was a simple explanation now. It just wasn’t clear yet.

“Thank you both for volunteering to help me.” Father Andrew smiled at us. I tried not to scoff at the “volunteering” reference. He was a Moroi in his late forties, with thinning gray hair. Even without much faith in religion, I still liked and respected him. “We aren’t doing anything particularly complex today,” he continued. “It’s a bit boring, really. We’ll have to do the regular cleaning, of course, and then I’d like to sort the boxes of old supplies I have sitting up in the attic.”

“We’re happy to do whatever you need,” Dimitri said solemnly. I repressed a sigh and tried not to think of all the other things I could be doing.

We set to it.

I was put on mop duty, and Dimitri took over dusting and polishing the wooden pews. He appeared thoughtful and intent as he cleaned, looking like he actually took pride in his work. I was still trying to figure out why he was here at all. Don’t get me wrong; I was happy to have him. His presence made me feel better, and of course I always loved watching him.

I thought maybe he was there to get more information out of me about what had happened that day with Stan, Christian, and Brandon. Or maybe he wanted to chastise me about the *other* day with Stan, where I’d been accused of jumping into battle for selfish reasons. These seemed like likely explanations, yet he never said a word. Even when the priest stepped out of the sanctuary to go to his office, Dimitri continued working quietly. I would have figured if he’d had anything to say, he would have done it then.

When we finished the cleaning, Father Andrew had us haul box after box of stuff down from the attic and into a storeroom at the back of the chapel. Lissa and Christian frequently used that attic as a secret getaway, and I wondered if having it cleaner would be a pro or a con for their romantic interludes. Maybe they would abandon it, and I could start getting some sleep.

With all of the stuff downstairs, the three of us settled on the floor and began sorting it all out. Father Andrew gave us instructions on what to save and what to throw out, and it was a relief to be off my feet for a change this week. He made small talk as we worked, asking me about classes and other things. It wasn’t so bad.

And as we worked, a thought came to me. I’d done a good job convincing myself that Mason had been a delusion brought on by lack of sleep, but getting assurance from an authority figure that ghosts weren’t real would go a

long way toward making me feel better.

"Hey," I said to Father Andrew. "Do you believe in ghosts? I mean, is there any mention of them in—" I gestured around us. "—in this stuff?"

The question clearly surprised him, but he didn't appear to take offense at me calling his vocation and life's work "this stuff." Or at the fact that I was obviously ignorant about it all, despite seventeen years of sitting through services. A bemused expression crossed his face, and he paused in his work.

"Well . . . it depends on how you define 'ghost,' I suppose."

I tapped a theology book with my finger. "The whole point of this is that when you die, you go to heaven or hell. That makes ghosts just stories, right? They're not in the Bible or anything."

"Again," he said, "it depends on your definition. Our faith has always held that after death, the spirit separates from the body and may indeed linger in this world."

"What?" A dusty bowl I was holding dropped out of my hand. Fortunately, it was wood and didn't break. I quickly retrieved it. That was *not* the answer I'd been expecting. "For how long? Forever?"

"No, no, of course not. That flies in the face of the resurrection and salvation, which form the cornerstone of our beliefs. But it's believed the soul can stay on earth for three to forty days after death. It eventually receives a 'temporary' judgment that sends it on from this world to heaven or hell—although no one will truly experience either until the actual Judgment Day, when the soul and body are reunited to live out eternity as one."

The salvation stuff was lost on me. The "three to forty days" was what caught my attention. I completely forgot about my sorting. "Yeah, but is it true or not? Are spirits really walking the earth for forty days after death?"

"Ah, Rose. Those who have to ask if faith is true are opening up a discussion they may not be ready for."

I had a feeling he was right. I sighed and turned back to the box in front of me.

"But," he said kindly, "if it helps you, some of these ideas parallel folk beliefs from Eastern Europe about ghosts that existed before the spread of Christianity. Those traditions have long upheld the idea of spirits staying around for a short time after death—particularly if the person in question died young or violently."

I froze. Whatever progress I'd made in convincing myself Mason had been brought on by stress instantly vanished. *Young or violently*.

"Why?" I asked in a small voice. "Why would they stay? Is it . . . is it for revenge?"

"I'm sure there are some who believe that, just as some believe it's because the soul has trouble finding peace after something so unsettling."

"What do you believe?" I asked.

He smiled. "I believe the soul separates from the body, just as our fathers teach us, but I doubt the soul's time on earth is anything the living can perceive. It's not like in the movies, with ghosts haunting buildings or coming to visit those they knew. I envision these spirits as more of an energy existing around us, something beyond our perception as they wait to move on and find peace. Ultimately, what matters is what happens beyond this earth when we

attain the eternal life our savior bought for us with his great sacrifice. That's what's important."

I wondered if Father Andrew would be so quick to say that if he'd seen what I'd seen. *Young or violently*. Both had applied to Mason, and he had died less than forty days ago. That sad, sad face came back to me, and I wondered what it had meant. Revenge? Or could he truly not find peace?

And how did Father Andrew's theology about heaven and hell fit with someone like me, who had died and come back to life? Victor Dashkov had said I'd gone to the world of the dead and returned when Lissa had healed me. What world of the dead? Was that heaven or hell? Or was it another way of referring to this in-between state on earth that Father Andrew was talking about?

I didn't say anything after that, because the idea of a revenge-seeking Mason was so startling. Father Andrew sensed the change in me, but he obviously didn't know what had brought it about. He tried to coax me out.

"I just got some new books in from a friend in another parish. Interesting stories about St. Vladimir." He tilted his head. "Are you still interested in him? And Anna?"

Theoretically, I was. Until we'd met Adrian, we'd only known of two other spirit users. One was our former teacher, Ms. Karp, who'd gone completely nuts from spirit and become a Strigoi to stop the madness. The other person was St. Vladimir, the school's namesake. He'd lived centuries ago and had brought his guardian, Anna, back from the dead, just as Lissa had me. It had made Anna shadow-kissed and created a bond between them too.

Normally, Lissa and I tried to get our hands on everything we could about Anna and Vlad, in order to learn more about ourselves. But, as incredible as it was for me to admit, I had bigger problems right now than the ever-present and ever-puzzling psychic link between Lissa and me. It had just been trumped by a ghost who could possibly be pissed off over my role in his untimely death.

"Yeah," I said evasively, not making eye contact. "I'm interested . . . but I don't think I can get to it anytime soon. I'm kind of busy with all this . . . you know, field experience stuff."

I fell silent again. He took the hint and let me work on without further interruption. Dimitri never said a word throughout any of this. When we finally finished sorting, Father Andrew told us we had one more task before our work was done. He pointed to some boxes that we'd organized and repacked.

"I need you to carry these over to the elementary campus," he said. "Leave them off at the Moroi dorm there. Ms. Davis has been teaching Sunday school for some of the kindergartners and might be able to use those."

It would take at least two trips between Dimitri and me, and the elementary campus was a fair distance away. Still, that put me one step closer to freedom.

"Why are you interested in ghosts?" Dimitri asked me on our first trip.

"Just making conversation," I said.

"I can't see your face right now, but I have a feeling you're lying again."

"Jeez, everyone thinks the worst of me lately. Stan accused me of glory-seeking."

“I heard about that,” said Dimitri, as we rounded a corner. The buildings of the elementary campus loomed up in front of us. “That might have been a little unfair of him.”

“A little, huh?” Hearing him admit that thrilled me, but it didn’t change my anger against Stan. That dark, grouchy feeling that had plagued me lately sprang to life. “Well, thanks, but I’m starting to lose faith in this field experience. Sometimes in the whole Academy.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“I don’t know. The school just seems so caught up in rules and policies that don’t have anything to do with real life. I saw what was out there, comrade. I went right to the monster’s lair. In some ways . . . I don’t know if this really prepares us.”

I expected him to argue, but to my surprise he said, “Sometimes I agree.”

I nearly stumbled as we stepped inside one of the two Moroi dorms on the elementary campus. The lobby looked a lot like the ones on the secondary campus. “Really?” I asked.

“Really,” he said, a small smile on his face. “I mean, I don’t agree that novices should be put out in the world when they’re ten or anything, but sometimes I’ve thought the field experience should actually be in the field. I probably learned more in my first year as a guardian than I did in all my years of training. Well . . . maybe not all. But it’s a different situation, absolutely.”

We exchanged looks, pleased over our agreement. Something warm fluttered up in me, putting the lid on my earlier anger. Dimitri understood my frustration with the system, but then, Dimitri understood *me*. He glanced around, but there was no one at the desk. A few students in their early teens were working or talking in the lobby.

“Oh,” I said, shifting the weight of the box I held. “We’re in the middle school dorm. The younger kids are next door.”

“Yes, but Ms. Davis lives in this building. Let me try to find her and see where she wants these.” He set his box down carefully. “I’ll be right back.”

I watched him go and set my own box down. Leaning against a wall, I glanced around and nearly jumped when I saw a Moroi girl only a couple feet away. She’d been standing so perfectly still, I hadn’t noticed her. She looked like she could be mid-teens—thirteen or fourteen—but she was tall, much taller than me. The slimness of her Moroi build made her look even taller. Her hair was a cloud of brown curls, and she had freckles—rare among the normally pale Moroi—across her face. Her eyes widened when she saw me looking at her.

“Oh. My. God. You’re Rose Hathaway, aren’t you?”

“Yeah,” I said with surprise. “Do you know me?”

“Everyone knows you. I mean, everyone heard about you. You’re the one who ran away. And then you came back and killed those Strigoi. That is *so* cool. Did you get *molnija* marks?” Her words came out in one long string. She hardly took a breath.

“Yeah. I have two.” Thinking about the tiny tattoos on the back of my neck made my skin itch.

Her pale green eyes—if possible—grew wider. “Oh my God. Wow.”

I usually grew irate when people made a big deal about the *molnija* marks.

After all, the circumstances had *not* been cool. But this girl was young, and there was something appealing about her.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Jillian—Jill. I mean, just Jill. Not both. Jillian's my full name. Jill's what everyone calls me."

"Right," I said, hiding a smile. "I figured it out."

"I heard Moroi used magic on that trip to fight. Is that true? I would *love* to do that. I wish someone would teach me. I use air. Do you think I could fight Strigoi with that? Everyone says I'm crazy." For centuries, Moroi using magic to fight had been viewed as a sin. Everyone believed it should be used peacefully. Recently, some had started to question that, particularly after Christian had proved useful in the Spokane escape.

"I don't know," I said. "You should talk to Christian Ozera."

She gaped. "Would he talk to *me*?"

"If you bring up fighting the establishment, yeah, he'll talk to you."

"Okay, cool. Was that Guardian Belikov?" she asked, switching subjects abruptly.

"Yeah."

I swore I thought she might faint then and there. "Really? He's even cuter than I heard. He's your teacher, right? Like, your own personal teacher?"

"Yeah." I wondered where he was. Talking to Jill was exhausting.

"Wow. You know, you guys don't even act like teacher and student. You seem like friends. Do you hang out when you're not training?"

"Er, well, kind of. Sometimes." I remembered my earlier thoughts, about how I was one of the few people Dimitri was social with outside of his guardian duties.

"I knew it! I can't even imagine that—I'd be freaking out all the time around him. I'd never get anything done, but you're so cool about it all, kind of like, 'Yeah, I'm with this totally hot guy, but whatever, it doesn't matter.'"

I laughed in spite of myself. "I think you're giving me more credit than I deserve."

"No way. And I don't believe any of those stories, you know."

"Um, stories?"

"Yeah, about you beating up Christian Ozera."

"Thanks," I said. Now rumors of my humiliation were trickling down to the lower campus. If I walked over to the elementary dorms, some six-year-old would probably tell me she'd heard that I killed Christian.

Jill's expression turned momentarily uncertain. "But I didn't know about the other story."

"What other story?"

"About how you and Adrian Ivashkov are—"

"No," I interrupted, not wanting to hear the rest. "Whatever you heard, it's not true."

"But it was really romantic."

"Then it's definitely not true."

Her face fell, and then she perked back up a few seconds later. "Hey, can you teach me to punch someone?"

"Wai—What? Why would you want to know that?"

“Well, I figure if I’m going to fight with magic someday, I should learn to fight the regular way too.”

“I’m probably not the right person to ask,” I told her. “Maybe you should, um, ask your P.E. teacher.”

“I did!” Her face looked distraught. “And he said no.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “I was joking about asking him.”

“Come on, it could help me fight a Strigoi someday.”

My laughter dried up. “No, it really wouldn’t.”

She bit her lip, still desperate to convince me. “Well, it would at least help against that psycho.”

“What? What psycho?”

“People keep getting beat up around here. Last week it was Dane Zeklos, and just the other day it was Brett.”

“Dane . . .” I ran through my knowledge of Moroi genealogy. There were a gazillion Zeklos students around. “That’s Jesse’s younger brother, yeah?”

Jill nodded. “Yup. One of our teachers was *so* mad, too, but Dane wouldn’t say a word. Neither would Brett.”

“Brett who?”

“Ozera.”

I did a double take. “Ozera?”

I had the impression she was really excited to tell me things I didn’t know. “He’s my friend Aimee’s boyfriend. He was all bruised up yesterday—had some weird things that looked like welts, too. Maybe burns? But he wasn’t as bad as Dane. And when Mrs. Callahan asked him about it, Brett convinced her it was nothing, and she let it go, which was weird. He was also in a really good mood—which was also weird, since you’d kind of think getting beat up would bring you down.”

Somewhere in the back of my mind, her words tickled a memory. There was some connection I should be making, but I couldn’t quite grasp it. Between Victor, ghosts, and the field experiences, it was honestly a wonder I could string words together anymore.

“So can you teach me so that I won’t get beat up?” Jill asked, clearly hoping she’d convinced me. She balled her fist up. “I just do this, right? Thumb across the fingers and swing?”

“Uh, well, it’s a little more complicated than that. You need to stand a certain way, or you’ll hurt yourself more than the other person. There are a lot of things you need to do with your elbows and hips.”

“Show me, please?” she begged. “I bet you’re really good.”

I *was* really good, but corrupting minors was one offense I didn’t yet have on my record, and I preferred to keep it that way. Fortunately, Dimitri came back just then with Ms. Davis.

“Hey,” I told him. “I have someone who wants to meet you. Dimitri, this is Jill. Jill, Dimitri.”

He looked surprised, but he smiled and shook her hand. She turned bright red and became speechless for a change. As soon as he released her hand, she stammered out a goodbye and ran off. We finished up with Ms. Davis and headed back toward the chapel for our second load.

“Jill knew who I was,” I told Dimitri as we walked. “She had kind of a hero-

worship thing going on."

"Does that surprise you?" he asked. "That younger students would look up to you?"

"I don't know. I just never thought about it. I don't think I'm that good of a role model."

"I disagree. You're outgoing, dedicated, and excel at everything you do. You've earned more respect than you think."

I gave him a sidelong glance. "And yet not enough to go to Victor's trial, apparently."

"Not this again."

"Yes, this again! Why don't you get how major this is? Victor's a huge threat."

"I know he is."

"And if he gets loose, he'll just start in on his crazy plans again."

"It's really unlikely he will get loose, you know. Most of those rumors about the queen letting him off are just that—rumors. You of all people should know not to believe everything you hear."

I stared stonily ahead, refusing to acknowledge his point. "You should still let us go. Or"—I took a deep breath—"you should at least let Lissa go."

It was harder for me to say those words than it should have been, but it was something I'd been thinking about. I didn't think I was a glory seeker like Stan had said, but there was a part of me that always wanted to be the one in the middle of a fight. I wanted to rush forward, doing what was right and helping others. Likewise, I wanted to be there at Victor's trial. I wanted to look him in the eye and make sure he was punished.

But as time went on, it seemed less likely that that would happen. They really weren't going to let us go. Maybe, though, maybe they'd let *one* of us go, and if it should be anyone, it should be Lissa. She'd been the target of Victor's plan, and though her going alone stirred up that nervous idea about how maybe she didn't need me to guard her, I'd still rather take the chance and see him put away.

Dimitri, understanding my need to rush in and take action, seemed surprised by my unusual behavior. "You're right—she should be there, but again, it's nothing I can do anything about. You keep thinking I can control this, but I can't."

"But did you do *everything* you could?" I thought back to Adrian's words in the dream, about how Dimitri could have done more. "You have a lot of influence. There must be something. Anything."

"Not as much influence as you think. I've got a high position here at the Academy, but in the rest of the guardian world, I'm still pretty young. And yes, I did actually speak up for you."

"Maybe you should have spoken up louder."

I could sense him shutting down. He'd discuss most things reasonably but wouldn't encourage me when I was just being a bitch. So, I tried to be more reasonable.

"Victor knows about us," I said. "He could say something."

"Victor has bigger things to worry about with this trial than us."

"Yeah, but you know him. He doesn't exactly act like a normal person

would. If he feels like he's lost all hope of getting off, he might decide to bust us just for the sake of revenge."

I'd never been able to confess my relationship with Dimitri to Lissa, yet our worst enemy knew about it. It was weirder even than Adrian knowing. Victor had figured it out by watching us and gathering data. I guess when you're a scheming villain, you get good at that stuff. He'd never made the knowledge public, though. Instead, he'd used it against us with the lust charm he'd made from earth magic. A charm like that wouldn't work if there wasn't already attraction in place. The charm just cranked things up. Dimitri and I had been all over each other and had been only a heartbeat away from having sex. It had been a pretty smart way for Victor to distract us without using violence. If anyone had tried to attack us, we could have put up a good fight. But turn us loose on each other? We had trouble fighting that.

Dimitri was silent for several moments. I knew he knew I had a point. "Then we'll have to deal with that as best we can," he said at last. "But if Victor's going to tell, he's going to do it whether or not you testify."

I refused to say anything else until we got to the church. When we did, Father Andrew told us that after going over some more things, he'd decided he really only needed one more box brought over to Ms. Davis.

"I'll do it," I told Dimitri crisply, once the priest was out of earshot. "You don't have to come."

"Rose, please don't make a big deal about this."

"It is a big deal!" I hissed. "And you don't seem to get it."

"I *do* get it. Do you really think I want to see Victor loose? Do you think I want us all at risk again?" It was the first time in a long time I'd seen his control on the verge of snapping. "But I told you, I've done all I can do. I'm not like you—I can't keep making a scene when things don't go my way."

"I do not."

"You're doing it right now."

He was right. Some part of me knew I'd crossed a line . . . but just like with everything else recently, I couldn't stop talking.

"Why did you even help me today?" I demanded. "Why are you here?"

"Is that so strange?" he asked. He *almost* looked hurt.

"Yes. I mean, are you trying to spy on me? Figure out why I messed up? Make sure I don't get into any trouble?"

He studied me, brushing hair out of his eyes. "Why does there have to be some ulterior motive?"

I wanted to blurt out a hundred different things. Like, if there wasn't a motive, then that meant he just wanted to spend time with me. And that made no sense, because we both knew we were only supposed to have a teacher-student relationship. *He* of all people should know that. He was the one who'd told me.

"Because everyone has motives."

"Yes. But not always the motives you think." He pushed open the door. "I'll see you later."

I watched him go, my feelings a tangle of confusion and anger. If the situation hadn't been so strange, I would have almost said it was like we'd just gone on a date.

TEN

THE NEXT DAY, MY guardian duties with Christian resumed. Once again, I found my own life put on hold for someone else's.

"How was your penance?" he asked as we walked across campus from his dorm.

I stifled a yawn. I hadn't been able to sleep well last night, both because of my feelings for Dimitri and because of what Father Andrew had told me. Nonetheless, I kept a sharp eye out. This was the location where Stan had attacked us twice before, and besides, the guardians were sick and twisted enough to come after me on a day when I was so exhausted.

"It was okay. The priest let us go early."

"Us?"

"Dimitri came and helped me. I think he felt bad about me being stuck with that work."

"Either that or he has nothing else to do now that he's not doing your extra sessions."

"Maybe, but I doubt it. All in all, I guess it wasn't that bad a day." Unless you considered learning about spiteful ghosts bad.

"I had a great day," said Christian, the smallest amount of smugness in his voice.

I repressed the urge to roll my eyes. "Yeah, I know."

He and Lissa had taken advantage of their guardianless day to take advantage of each other. I supposed I should be glad they'd held off until Eddie and I weren't around, but in a lot of ways, it didn't matter. True, when I was awake, I could block out all of the details, but I still knew what was going on. A bit of the jealousy and anger I'd felt from the last time they'd been together returned. It was the same problem all over again: Lissa doing all the

things I couldn't do.

I was dying to go eat breakfast. I could smell French toast and hot maple syrup. Carbs wrapped in more carbs. Yum. But Christian wanted blood before we ate solid food, and his needs trumped mine. *They come first.* He'd apparently skipped his daily blood dose yesterday—probably to maximize his romantic time.

The feeder room wasn't crowded, but we still had to wait.

"Hey," I said. "Do you know Brett Ozera? You're related, right?" After my encounter with Jill, I'd finally put some pieces together. Brett Ozera and Dane Zeklos had reminded me of how Brandon had looked the day of Stan's first attack. The disaster of that attack had made me completely forget about Brandon, but the coincidences here suddenly stirred my curiosity. All three had been beaten up. All three had been in denial.

Christian nodded. "Yeah, in the way we're all kind of related. I don't know him that well—he's like a third or fourth cousin or something. His branch of the family hasn't had much to do with mine since . . . well, you know."

"I heard something weird about him." I then related what Jill had told me about Dane and Brett.

"That's weird," agreed Christian. "But people get in fights."

"Yeah, but there are some weird connections here. And royals aren't usually on the losing ends of fights—all three of these guys were."

"Well, maybe that's it. You know how it's been. A lot of royals are getting pissed off that non-royals want to change how guardians are assigned and learn to start fighting. That's the whole point of Jesse and Ralf's stupid little club. They want to make sure royals stay on top. Non-royals are probably getting just as pissed off and fighting back."

"So, what, some kind of vigilante is out making royals pay?"

"Wouldn't be the weirdest thing that's happened around here," he pointed out.

"That's for damn sure," I muttered.

Christian's name was called, and he peered ahead. "Look at that," he said happily. "Alice again."

"I don't get your fascination with her," I observed as we approached the old feeder. "Lissa's always kind of excited to see her too. But Alice is nuts."

"I know," he said. "That's what's so great."

Alice greeted us as Christian sat down beside her. I leaned against the wall, arms crossed over my chest. Feeling uppity, I said, "Alice, the scenery hasn't changed. It's exactly the same as last time."

She turned her dazed eyes on me. "Patience, Rose. You must be patient. And prepared. Are you prepared?"

The switch in subject threw me a little. It was like talking to Jill, except less sane. "Um, prepared how? For the scenery?"

In what had to be a prime moment of irony, she looked at me as though I were the one who was crazy. "Armed. Are you armed? You're going to protect us, aren't you?"

I reached inside my coat and pulled out the practice stake I'd been given for the field experience. "Got you covered," I said.

She looked immensely relieved and apparently couldn't tell the difference

between a real stake and a fake one. “Good,” she said. “Now we’ll be safe.”

“That’s right,” said Christian. “With Rose armed, we have nothing to worry about. The Moroi world can rest easy.”

Alice was oblivious to his sarcasm. “Yes. Well, nowhere is ever safe.”

I concealed the stake again. “We’re safe. We’ve got the best guardians in the world protecting us, not to mention the wards. Strigoi aren’t getting in here.”

I didn’t add what I’d recently learned: that Strigoi could get *humans* to break the wards. Wards were invisible lines of power that were composed of all four elements. They were created when four Moroi, each one strong in a different element, walked around an area and laid the magic in a circle upon the ground, creating a protective border. Moroi magic was imbued with life, and a strong field of it kept out Strigoi, since they were devoid of life. So wards were frequently laid around Moroi dwellings. Tons of them were laid around this school. Since stakes were also imbued with all four elements, driving a stake through a ward line in the ground pierced the ward and canceled out the protective effect. This had never been much of a concern because Strigoi couldn’t touch stakes. However, in some recent attacks, humans—who could touch stakes—had served Strigoi and broken some wards. We believed the Strigoi I’d killed had been the ringleaders in that group, but we still didn’t know for sure.

Alice studied me closely with her cloudy eyes, almost as though she knew what I was thinking. “Nowhere is safe. Wards fade. Guardians die.”

I glanced over at Christian, who shrugged in a sort of *what did you expect from her?* kind of way.

“If you guys are done with your girl talk, can I eat now?” he asked.

Alice was more than happy to comply; he was her first hit of the day. She soon forgot about wards or anything else and simply lost herself to the ecstasy of his bite. I forgot about wards too. I had a one-track mind, really: I still wanted to know if Mason had been real or not. The priest’s frightening explanation aside, I had to admit Mason’s visits hadn’t been threatening, just scary. If he was out to get me, he was kind of doing a half-assed job of it. Once again, I started putting more stock in the stress-and-fatigue theory.

“Now it’s time for *me* to eat,” I said when Christian finished. I was pretty sure I could smell bacon now. That’d probably make Christian happy. He could wrap it around his French toast.

We’d barely stepped out of the room when Lissa came running up to us, Eddie trailing behind. Excitement lit her face, though the feelings in the bond weren’t exactly happy.

“Did you hear?” she asked, a little breathless.

“Hear what?” I asked.

“You have to hurry—go pack your things. We’re going to Victor’s trial. Right now.”

There’d been no warning at all about when Victor’s trial would even occur, let alone that someone had apparently decided we could go. Christian and I exchanged brief, startled looks and then hurried off to his room to gather our things.

Packing was a breeze. My bag was ready to go already, and Christian only

took a minute to throw his together. In less than a half hour, we were out on the Academy's landing strip. Two private jets sat in attendance, one of which was fired up and waiting to go. A couple of Moroi hurried about, doing last-minute things with the plane and the runway.

No one seemed to know what was going on. Lissa had simply been told that she, Christian, and I were going to testify and that Eddie could come along to continue his field experience. There'd been no explanation as to why things had changed, and a weird mix of eagerness and apprehension crackled around us. We all wanted to see Victor locked away for good, but now that we were actually faced with the reality of the trial and of seeing him—well, it was kind of scary.

A few guardians lingered near the steps going up to the plane. I recognized them as the ones who had helped capture Victor. They were probably going to do double duty and serve as witnesses and as our protection. Dimitri hovered near the outskirts, and I hurried over to him.

"I'm sorry," I gulped out. "I'm so sorry."

He turned toward me, his face schooled to that perfect picture of neutrality that he was so good at. "Sorry for what?"

"For all the horrible things I said yesterday. You did it—you really did it. You got them to let us go."

Despite my nervousness about seeing Victor, I was filled with elation. Dimitri had come through. I'd known all along that he really cared about me—this just proved it. If there hadn't been so many people around, I would have hugged him.

Dimitri's face didn't change. "It wasn't me, Rose. I had nothing to do with it."

Alberta signaled that we could board, and he turned away to join the others. I stood frozen for a moment, watching him and trying to figure out what had happened. If he hadn't intervened, then why were we going? Lissa's diplomatic efforts had been shot down a while ago. Why the change of heart?

My friends were already on board, so I hurried to catch up. As soon as I stepped into the cabin, a voice called to me. "Little dhampir! About time you got here."

I looked and saw Adrian waving, a drink in his hand. Great. We'd had to beg and plead to go along, yet Adrian had somehow just glided on in. Lissa and Christian were sitting together, so I joined Eddie in the hopes of staying away from Adrian. Eddie gave me the window seat. Adrian moved to the seat in front of us, though, and might as well have been sitting in our row, as often as he turned around to talk to me. His chatter and outrageous flirting indicated he'd been sipping cocktails long before the rest of us had come aboard. I kind of wished I'd had a few myself once we were airborne. A wicked headache set in almost immediately after liftoff, and I entertained a fantasy of vodka numbing the pain.

"We're going to Court," Adrian said. "Aren't you excited about it?"

I closed my eyes and rubbed my temples. "About which one? The royal one or the legal one?"

"The royal one. Did you bring a dress?"

"Nobody told me to."

“So . . . that’s a ‘no.’”

“Yes.”

“Yes? I thought you meant no.”

I opened one eye and glared. “I did mean no, and you know it. No, I did not bring a dress.”

“We’ll get you one,” he said loftily.

“You’re going to take me shopping? I’m going to go out on a limb and guess they won’t consider you a reliable chaperone.”

“Shopping? As if. There are tailors that live there. We’ll get you something custom-made.”

“We’re not staying that long. And do I really need a dress for what we’re doing there?”

“No, I’d just kind of like to see you in one.”

I sighed and leaned my head against the window. The pain in my skull was still throbbing. It was like the air was pressing in on me. Something flashed in my peripheral vision, and I turned in surprise, but there was nothing but stars outside the window.

“Something black,” he continued. “Satin, I think . . . maybe with lace trim. Do you like lace? Some women think it itches.”

“Adrian.” It was like a hammer, a hammer inside and outside my head.

“You could get a nice velvet trim too, though. That wouldn’t itch.”

“Adrian.” Even my eye sockets seemed to hurt.

“And then a slit up the side to show off what great legs you have. It could go nearly to the hip and have this cute little bow—”

“*Adrian*!” Something inside of me burst. “Will you shut the hell up for five seconds?” I yelled so loud that the pilot had probably heard me. Adrian had that rare look of astonishment on his face.

Alberta, sitting across the aisle from Adrian, shot up in her seat. “Rose,” she exclaimed. “What’s going on?”

I gritted my teeth and rubbed my forehead. “I have the *worst* fucking headache in the world, and he won’t shut up.” I didn’t even realize I’d sworn in front of an instructor until several seconds later. From the other side of my field of vision, I thought I saw something else—another shadow darting through the plane, reminding me of black wings. Like a bat or a raven. I covered my eyes. There was nothing flying through the plane. “God, why won’t it go away?”

I expected Alberta to chastise me for the outburst, but instead, Christian spoke: “She hasn’t eaten today. She was really hungry earlier.”

I uncovered my eyes. Alberta’s face was filled with concern, and Dimitri now hovered behind her. More shadowy shapes flitted across my vision. Most were indistinct, but I could have sworn I saw something that looked like a skull mixed in with the darkness. I blinked rapidly, and it all disappeared. Alberta turned to one of the flight attendants.

“Can you get her something to eat? And find a painkiller?”

“Where’s it at?” Dimitri asked me. “The pain?”

With all of this attention, my explosion suddenly seemed excessive. “It’s a headache. . . . I’m sure it’ll go away. . . .” Seeing his stern look, I pointed to the center of my forehead. “It’s like something pushing on my skull. And

there's pain kind of behind my eyes. I keep feeling like . . . well, it's like I've got something in my eye. I think I'm seeing a shadow or something. Then I blink and it's gone."

"Ah," said Alberta. "That's a migraine symptom—having vision problems. It's called an aura. People sometimes get it before the headache sets in."

"An aura?" I asked, startled. I glanced up at Adrian. He was looking at me over the top of his seat, his long arms hanging over the back of it.

"Not that kind," he said, a small smile turning up his lips. "Same name. Like Court and court. Migraine auras are images and light you see when a migraine's coming on. They have nothing to do with the auras around people I see. But I tell you . . . the aura I can see . . . the one around you . . . wow."

"Black?"

"And then some. It's obvious even after all the drinks I've had. Never seen anything like it."

I didn't exactly know what to make of that, but then the flight attendant returned with a banana, a granola bar, and some ibuprofen. It was a far cry from French toast, but it sounded good on my empty stomach. I consumed it all and then propped a pillow up against the window. Closing my eyes, I rested my head and hoped I could sleep the headache off before we landed. Mercifully, everyone else stayed quiet.

I had drifted off a little when I felt a slight touch on my arm. "Rose?"

Opening my eyes, I peered at Lissa as she sat in Eddie's seat. Those bat-winged shapes flitted behind her, and my head still hurt. In those swirling shadows, I again saw what looked like a face, this time with a wide gaping mouth and eyes like fire. I flinched.

"You're still in pain?" Lissa asked, peering at me. I blinked, and the face was gone.

"Yeah, I—oh no." I realized what she was going to do. "Don't do it. Don't waste it on me."

"It's easy," she said. "It hardly fazes me."

"Yeah, but the more you use it . . . the more it hurts you in the long run. Even if it's easy now."

"I'll worry about that later. Here."

She clasped my hand between hers and closed her eyes. Through our bond, I felt the magic welling up in her as she drew upon spirit's healing power. To her, magic felt warm and golden. I'd been healed before, and it always came through to me as varying temperatures: hot, then cold, then hot, etc. But this time, when she released the magic and sent it into me, I didn't feel anything except a very faint tingle. Her eyelids fluttered open.

"Wh—what happened?" she asked.

"Nothing," I said. "The headache's still going strong."

"But I . . ." The confusion and shock on her face mirrored what I sensed in her. "I had it. I felt the magic. It worked."

"I don't know, Liss. It's okay, really. You haven't been off the meds that long, you know."

"Yeah, but I healed Eddie the other day without any problems. *And* Adrian," she added dryly. He was hanging over the seat again, watching us intently.

"Those were scrapes," I said. "This is a five-alarm migraine we're talking

about. Maybe you've got to build back up."

Lissa bit her lower lip. "You don't think the pills permanently hurt my magic, do you?"

"Nah," said Adrian, head tilted to the side. "You lit up like a supernova when you were summoning it. You had magic. I just don't think it had any effect on her."

"Why not?" she demanded.

"Maybe she's got something you can't heal."

"A headache?" I asked in disbelief.

He shrugged. "What do I look like, a doctor? I don't know. Just telling you what I saw."

I sighed and placed a hand on my forehead. "Well, I appreciate the help, Liss, and I appreciate your annoying commentary, Adrian. But I think sleep might be the best thing for now. Maybe it's stress or something." Sure, why not? Stress was the answer to everything lately. Ghosts. Incurable headaches. Weird faces floating in the air. "Probably can't heal that."

"Maybe," she said, sounding as though she took personal offense at me having something she couldn't fix. Inside her mind, though, her accusations were turned toward herself, not me. She worried she wasn't good enough.

"It's okay," I said soothingly. "You're just getting your stride back. Once you're up to full power, I'll go crack a rib or something so we can test it."

She groaned. "The horrible part is that I don't think you're joking." After a quick squeeze of my hand, she stood up. "Sleep well."

She left, and I soon realized Eddie wasn't coming back. He'd taken a new seat so that I'd have more room. Appreciative, I fluffed and repositioned the pillow while stretching my legs out as best I could across the seats. A few more phantom clouds danced across my vision, and then I closed my eyes to sleep.

I woke up later when the plane touched down, the sounds of its engines kicking into reverse startling me out of a deep sleep. To my relief, the headache was gone. So were the weird shapes floating around me.

"Better?" Lissa asked when I stood up and yawned.

I nodded. "Much. Better still if I can get some real food."

"Well," she laughed, "somehow I doubt there's any shortage of food around here."

She was right. Glancing out the windows, I tried to get my first look at our surroundings. We'd made it. We were at the Moroi Royal Court.

ELEVEN

WE STEPPED OFF THE plane and were immediately hit with wet, blustery weather. Sleet cracked into us, far worse than the flaky white stuff falling back in Montana. We were on the East Coast now, or well, close to it. The queen's court was in Pennsylvania, near the Pocono Mountains, a range I had only a vague idea about. I knew we weren't too close to any major cities, like Philadelphia or Pittsburgh, which were the only ones I knew in the state.

The runway we'd landed on was part of the Court's property, so we were already behind wards. It was just like the Academy's small landing strip. In fact, in many ways, the Royal Court was laid out exactly like the school. It was what they told humans the compound was, actually. The Court was a collection of buildings, beautiful and ornate, spreading across well-tended grounds adorned with trees and flowers. At least, the land would be adorned with them when spring came. Just like in Montana, the vegetation was bleak and leafless.

We were met by a group of five guardians, all dressed in black pants and matching coats, with white shirts underneath. They weren't uniforms exactly, but custom usually dictated that for formal occasions, guardians wear some sort of nice ensemble. By comparison, in our jeans and T-shirts, our group looked like somebody's poor relations. Yet I couldn't help but think we'd be a lot more comfortable if it came to a fight with Strigoi.

The guardians knew Alberta and Dimitri—honestly, those two knew *everybody*—and after some formalities, everyone relaxed and became friendly. We were all eager to get in out of the cold, and our escorts led us toward the buildings. I knew enough about the Court to know that the largest and most elaborate of the buildings was where all official Moroi business was conducted. It resembled some sort of gothic palace on the outside, but inside, I

suspected it probably looked like any set of modern government offices you'd find among humans.

We weren't taken there, however. We were led to an adjacent building, just as exquisite on the outside, but half the size. One of the guardians explained that this was where all guests and dignitaries traveling in and out of the Court stayed. To my surprise, we each got our own room.

Eddie started to protest this, adamantly saying he needed to stay with Lissa. Dimitri smiled and told him it wasn't necessary. In a place like this, guardians didn't need to stay as close to their Moroi. In fact, they often separated to do their own things. The Court was as heavily warded as the Academy. And really, Moroi visitors at the Academy were rarely trailed so closely by their guardians either. It was only for the sake of the field experience that it was being done with us. Eddie agreed with some reluctance, and again, I was amazed at his dedication.

Alberta spoke briefly and then turned to the rest of us. "Decompress for a bit and be ready for dinner in four hours. Lissa, the queen wants to see you in an hour."

A jolt of surprise ran through Lissa, and she and I exchanged brief, puzzled looks. The last time Lissa had seen the queen, Tatiana had snubbed her and embarrassed her in front of the school for having running away with me. Both of us wondered what she'd want to see Lissa about now.

"Sure," said Lissa. "Rose and I'll be ready."

Alberta shook her head. "Rose isn't going. The queen specifically asked for you alone."

Of course she had. What interest would the queen have in Vasilisa Dragomir's shadow? A nasty voice whispered in my head, *Expendable, expendable. . . .*

The dark sentiment startled me, and I shoved it aside. I went to my room, relieved to see it had a TV. The thought of vegging for the next four hours sounded fantastic. The rest of the room was pretty fancy, very modern looking, with sleek black tables and white leather furniture. I was kind of afraid to sit on it. Ironically, despite how nice it all was, the place wasn't as decked out as the ski resort that we'd stay in over the holidays. I guessed when you came to the Royal Court, you came for business, not a vacation.

I had just sprawled on the leather couch and turned on the TV when I felt Lissa in my mind. *Come talk,* she said. I sat up, surprised by the message itself and the content. Usually our bond was all about feelings and impressions. Specific requests like this were rare.

I got up and left the room, going to the one next door. Lissa opened the door.

"What, you couldn't have come to me?" I asked.

"Sorry," she said, looking like she genuinely meant it. It was hard to be grouchy around someone so nice. "I just didn't have the time. I'm trying to decide what to wear."

Her suitcase was already open on the bed, with things hung up in the closet. Unlike me, she'd come prepared for every occasion, formal and casual alike. I lay down on the couch. Hers was plush velvet, not leather.

"Wear the print blouse with the black slacks," I told her. "Not a dress."

"Why not a dress?"

"Because you don't want to look like you're groveling."

"This is the queen, Rose. Dressing up is showing respect, not groveling."

"If you say so."

But Lissa wore the outfit I suggested anyway. She talked to me as she finished getting ready, and I watched with envy as she applied makeup. I hadn't realized how much I'd missed cosmetics myself. When she and I had lived with humans, I'd been pretty diligent about primping every day. Now, there never seemed to be enough time—or any reason. I was always in some kind of scuffle that made makeup pointless and ruined it anyway. The most I could do was to slather my face with moisturizer. It seemed excessive in the mornings—like I was putting on a mask—yet by the time I faced the cold weather and other harsh conditions, I was always surprised to see my skin had sucked all the moisture up.

The smallest pang of regret shot through me that I'd rarely have any opportunities to do this for the rest of my life. Lissa would spend most of her days dressed up, out at royal functions. No one would notice me. It was weird, considering that until this last year, I'd always been the one who was always noticed.

"Why do you think she wants to see me?" Lissa asked.

"Maybe to explain why we're here."

"Maybe."

Unease filled Lissa, despite her calm exterior. She still hadn't entirely recovered from the queen's brutal humiliation last fall. My own petty jealousy and moping suddenly seemed stupid when compared with what she had to go through. I mentally slapped myself, reminding myself that I wasn't just her unseen guardian. I was also her best friend, and we hadn't talked very much lately.

"You have nothing to be afraid of, Liss. You haven't done anything wrong. And really, you've been doing everything right. Your grades are perfect. Your behavior's perfect. Remember all those people you impressed on the ski trip? That bitch has nothing to get on you about."

"You shouldn't say that," said Lissa automatically. She applied mascara to her eyelashes, studied them, and then added another coat.

"Just call 'em like I see 'em. If she gives you any grief, then it's just going to be because she's afraid of you."

Lissa laughed. "Why would she be afraid of me?"

"Because people are drawn to you, and people like her don't like it when others steal all the attention." I was a bit astonished at how wise I sounded. "Plus, you're the last Dragomir. You're always going to be in the spotlight. Who's she? Just another Ivashkov. There are a ton of them. Probably because all the guys are like Adrian and have all sorts of illegitimate children."

"Adrian doesn't have any children."

"That we know of," I said mysteriously.

She snickered and stepped back from the mirror, pleased with her face. "Why are you always so mean to Adrian?"

I gave her a look of mock astonishment. "You're standing up for Adrian now? Whatever happened to you warning me to stay away from him? You

practically bit my head off the first time I hung out with him—and that wasn't even by my choice."

She took a thin golden chain out of her suitcase and tried to fasten it around her neck. "Well, yeah . . . I didn't really know him then. He's not so bad. And it's true. . . . I mean, he's not a great role model or anything, but I also think some of those stories about him and other girls are exaggerated."

"I don't," I said, jumping up. She still hadn't managed to fasten the chain, so I took it and put the clasp together for her.

"Thanks," she said, running her hands over the necklace. "I think Adrian really likes you. Like, in a wanting-to-be-serious way."

I shook my head and stepped back. "Nope. He likes me in a wanting-to-get-the-clothes-off-the-cute-dhampir way."

"I don't believe that."

"That's because you believe the best about everyone."

She looked skeptical as she began brushing her hair smooth over her shoulders. "I don't know about that either. But I do think he's not as bad as you think. I know it hasn't been that long since Mason, but you should think about going out with someone else. . . ."

"Wear your hair up." I handed her a barrette from her suitcase. "Mason and I were never really going out. You know that."

"Yeah. Well, I guess that's more reason to start thinking about dating someone. High school's not over yet. Seems like you should be doing something fun."

Fun. It was ironic. Months ago, I'd argued with Dimitri about how it wasn't fair that, as a guardian-in-training, I had to watch my reputation and not act too crazy. He'd agreed it wasn't fair that I couldn't do the kinds of things other girls my age could, but that that was the price I paid for my future. I'd been upset, but after Victor's meddling, I started to see Dimitri's point—to such an extent that he'd actually hinted I shouldn't try to limit myself *that* much. Now, after Spokane, I felt like a completely different girl from the one who'd talked to Dimitri last fall about having fun. I was only a couple months from graduation. High school things . . . dances . . . boyfriends . . . what did they matter in the grand scheme of things? Everything at the Academy seemed so trivial—unless it was making me a better guardian.

"I don't really think I need a boyfriend to complete my high school experience," I told her.

"I don't think you do either," she agreed, tugging her ponytail straight. "But you used to flirt and go out sometimes. I feel like it'd just be nice for you to do a little of that. It's not like you'd have to have anything serious with Adrian."

"Well, you won't get any arguments from him on that. I think the last thing he wants is anything serious, that's the problem."

"Well, according to some of the stories, he's very serious. I heard the other day that you were engaged. Someone else said that he'd been disowned because he told his dad he'd never love anyone else."

"Ahhhh." There was really no other adequate response to all these silly rumors. "The creepy thing is that the same stories are all over the place at the elementary campus too." I stared at the ceiling. "Why does this stuff keep happening to me?"

She walked over to the couch and looked down at me. “Because you’re awesome, and everyone loves you.”

“Nah. You’re the one everyone loves.”

“Well, then, I guess we’re both awesome and loveable. And one of these days”—a mischievous sparkle danced in her eyes—“we’ll find a guy you love back.”

“Don’t hold your breath. None of that matters. Not right now. You’re the one I’ve got to worry about. We’re going to graduate, and you’ll go off to college, and it’ll be great. No more rules, just us on our own.”

“It’s a little scary,” she mused. “Thinking about being on my own. But you’ll be with me. And Dimitri too.” She sighed. “I can’t imagine not having you around. I can’t even really remember when you weren’t around.”

I sat up and gave her a light punch in her arm. “Hey, be careful. You’re going to make Christian jealous. Oh crap. I suppose he’s going to be around too, huh? No matter where we end up going?”

“Probably. You, me, him, Dimitri, and any guardians Christian gets. One big happy family.”

I scoffed, but inside of me, there was a warm fuzzy feeling building. Things were crazy in our world right now, but I had all these great people in my life. As long as we were all together, everything would be okay.

She looked at the clock, and her fear returned. “I’ve gotta go. Will you . . . will you go with me?”

“You know I can’t.”

“I know . . . not in body . . . but like, will you do that thing? Where you’re watching in my head? It’ll make me feel like I’m not alone.”

It was the first time Lissa had ever asked me to purposely do that. Normally, she hated the thought of me seeing through her eyes. It was a sign of how nervous she really was.

“Sure,” I said. “It’s probably better than anything on TV anyway.”

I returned to my own room, taking up an identical position on the couch. Clearing my thoughts, I opened myself up to Lissa’s mind, going beyond simply knowing her feelings. It was something the shadow-kissed bond allowed me to do and was the most intense part of our connection. It wasn’t just feeling her thoughts—it was actually being inside of her, looking through her eyes and sharing her experiences. I’d learned to control it only recently. I used to slip in without wanting to, much as I sometimes couldn’t keep her feelings out. I could control my out-of-body experiences now and even summon up the phenomenon at will—just like I was about to do.

Lissa had just reached the parlor the queen was waiting in. Moroi might use terms like “royal” and even kneel sometimes, but there were no thrones or anything like that here. Tatiana sat in an ordinary armchair, dressed in a navy blue skirt and blazer, looking more like a corporate businesswoman than any sort of monarch. She wasn’t alone, either. A tall, stately Moroi whose blond hair was laced with silver sat near her. I recognized her: Priscilla Voda, the queen’s friend and adviser. We’d met her on the ski trip, and she’d been impressed with Lissa. I took her presence as a good sign. Silent guardians, dressed in black and white, stood along the wall. To my astonishment, Adrian was there too. He reclined on a small love seat, seeming completely oblivious

to the fact that he was hanging out with the Moroi's ultimate leader. The guardian with Lissa announced her.

"Princess Vasilisa Dragomir."

Tatiana nodded in acknowledgment. "Welcome, Vasilisa. Please sit down."

Lissa sat down near Adrian, her apprehension growing by leaps and bounds. A Moroi servant came by and offered tea or coffee, but Lissa declined. Tatiana meanwhile sipped from a teacup and scrutinized Lissa from head to toe. Priscilla Voda broke the awkward silence.

"Remember what I said about her?" Priscilla asked cheerfully. "She was very impressive at our state dinner in Idaho. Settled a huge spat over Moroi fighting with guardians. She even managed to calm Adrian's father down."

A frosty smile crossed Tatiana's cold features. "That is impressive. Half the time, I still feel like Nathan is twelve years old."

"Me too," said Adrian, drinking from a wine glass.

Tatiana ignored him and again focused on Lissa. "*Everyone* seems impressed with you, really. I hear nothing but good things about you, in spite of your past transgressions . . . which I'm given to understand weren't entirely without their reasons." Lissa's look of surprise actually made the queen laugh. There wasn't much warmth or humor in the laugh, though. "Yes, yes . . . I know all about your powers, and of course I know what happened with Victor. Adrian's been filling me in about spirit as well. It's so strange. Tell me . . . can you . . ." She glanced to a nearby table. A flowerpot sat on it, dark green shoots sticking through the soil. It was some kind of bulb-based plant that someone was growing indoors. Like its outside counterparts, it was waiting for spring.

Lissa hesitated. Using her powers in front of others was a strange thing for her. But, Tatiana was watching expectantly. After only a few moments more, Lissa leaned over and touched the shoots. The stems shot up through the dirt, growing taller—almost a foot high. Huge pods formed along the sides as it grew, bursting open to reveal fragrant white flowers. Easter lilies. Lissa withdrew her hand.

Wonder showed on Tatiana's face, and she muttered something in a language I didn't understand. She hadn't been born in the United States but had chosen to hold her Court here. She spoke with no accent, but, as they did for Dimitri, moments of surprise apparently brought out her native tongue. Within seconds, she put her stately mask back on.

"Hmm. Interesting," she said. Talk about an understatement.

"It could be very useful," said Priscilla. "Vasilisa and Adrian can't be the only two out there with it. If we could find others, so much could be learned. The healing itself is a gift, let alone anything else they can conjure. Just think what we could do with it."

Lissa turned optimistic. For a while, she'd been going out of her way to find others like her. Adrian had been the only one she'd discovered, and that had been through sheer luck. If the queen and Moroi council put their resources into it, there was no telling what they might find. Yet something about Priscilla's words troubled Lissa.

"Begging your pardon, Princess Voda . . . I'm not sure we should be so eager to use my—or others'—healing powers as much as you might want to."

"Why not?" asked Tatiana. "From what I understand, you can heal almost

anything."

"I can . . ." said Lissa slowly. "And I want to. I wish I could help everybody, but I can't. I mean, don't get me wrong, I'll definitely help some people. But I know we'd run into other people like Victor, who want to abuse it. And after a while . . . I mean, how do you choose? Who gets to live? Part of life is that . . . well, some people have to die. My powers aren't a prescription you can get filled as needed, and honestly, I'm afraid they would only be used for, uh, certain kinds of people. Just like the guardians are."

A slight tension built in the room. What Lissa had insinuated was rarely ever mentioned in public.

"What are you talking about?" asked Tatiana with narrowed eyes. I could tell she already knew.

Lissa was scared to say her next words, but she did it anyway. "Everyone knows that there's a certain, um, method to how guardians are distributed. Only the elite get them. Royals. Rich people. People in power."

A chill fell over the room. Tatiana's mouth settled into a straight line. She didn't speak for several moments, and I had a feeling everyone else was holding their breath. I certainly was. "You don't think our royals deserve special protection?" she asked finally. "You don't think *you* do—the last of the Dragomirs?"

"I think keeping our leaders safe is important, yeah. But I also think we need to stop sometimes and look at what we're doing. It could be time to reconsider the way we've always done things."

Lissa sounded so wise and so self-assured. I was proud of her. Watching Priscilla Voda, I could see that she was proud too. She'd liked Lissa from the beginning. But I could also tell that Priscilla was nervous. She answered to the queen and knew that Lissa was swimming in dangerous waters.

Tatiana sipped her tea. I think it was an excuse to gather her thoughts. "I understand," she said, "that you're also in favor of Moroi fighting with the guardians and attacking Strigoi?"

Another dangerous topic, one Lissa pushed forward into. "I think if there are Moroi who want to, they shouldn't be denied the chance." Jill suddenly popped into my head.

"Moroi lives are precious," said the queen. "They shouldn't be risked."

"Dhampir lives are precious too," Lissa countered. "If they fight with Moroi, it could save everybody. And again, if Moroi are willing, why deny them? They deserve to know how to defend themselves. And people like Tasha Ozera have developed ways of fighting with magic."

The mention of Christian's aunt brought a frown to the queen's face. Tasha had been attacked by Strigoi when younger and had spent the rest of her life learning to fight back. "Tasha Ozera . . . she's a troublemaker. She's starting to gather a lot of other troublemakers."

"She's trying to introduce new ideas." I noticed then that Lissa wasn't afraid any longer. She was confident in her beliefs and wanted them expressed. "Throughout history, people with new ideas—who think differently and try to change things—have always been called troublemakers. But seriously? Do you want the truth?"

A wry look crossed Tatiana's face, almost a smile. "Always."

"We need change. I mean, our traditions are important. We shouldn't give up on those. But sometimes, I think we're misguided."

"Misguided?"

"As time's gone on, we've gone along with other changes. We've evolved. Computers. Electricity. Technology in general. We all agree those make our lives better. Why can't we be the same in the way we act? Why are we still clinging to the past when there are better ways to do things?"

Lissa was breathless, worked up and excited. Her cheeks felt warm, and her heart raced. All of us were watching Tatiana, searching for any clue in that stony face.

"You're very interesting to talk to," she finally said. She made *interesting* sound like a dirty word. "But I have things I must do now." She stood up, and everyone hastily followed suit, even Adrian. "I won't be joining you for dinner, but you and your companions will have everything you need. I'll see you tomorrow at the trial. No matter how radical and naively idealistic your ideas are, I'm glad you'll be there to complete his sentencing. His imprisonment, at least, is something we can all agree on."

Tatiana swept out, two guardians immediately following. Priscilla followed too, leaving Lissa and Adrian alone.

"Well done, cousin. Aren't many people who can throw the old lady off-balance like that."

"She didn't seem very off-balance."

"Oh, she was. Believe me. Most of the people she deals with every day wouldn't talk to her like that, let alone someone your age." He stood up and extended a hand to Lissa. "Come on. I'll show you around this place. Take your mind off things."

"I've been here before," she said. "When I was younger."

"Yeah, well, the things we get to see when we're young are different than the things we get to see when we're older. Did you know there's a twenty-four-hour bar in here? We'll get you a drink."

"I don't want a drink."

"You will before this trip's over."

I left Lissa's head and returned to my room. The meeting with the queen was over, and Lissa didn't need my unseen support. Besides, I really didn't want to hang out with Adrian right now. Sitting up, I discovered I felt surprisingly alert. Being in her head had kind of been like taking a nap.

I decided to do a little exploring of my own. I'd never been to the Royal Court. It really was supposed to be like a mini-town, and I wondered what other things there were to see, aside from the bar that Adrian probably lived in while visiting.

I headed downstairs, figuring I'd have to go outside. As far as I knew, this building only held guestrooms. It was kind of like the palace's hotel. When I got to the entryway, however, I saw Christian and Eddie standing and talking with someone I couldn't see. Eddie, ever vigilant, saw me and grinned.

"Hey, Rose. Look who we found."

As I approached, Christian stepped aside, revealing the mystery person. I came to a halt, and she grinned at me.

"Hi, Rose."

A moment later, I felt a smile slowly creep over my face. “Hello, Mia.”

TWELVE

IF YOU'D ASKED ME six months ago, I would have said there was no way I'd be happy to run into Mia Rinaldi at the Royal Court. She was a year younger than me and had held a grudge against Lissa since freshman year—a grudge so big that Mia had gone to great extremes to make life miserable for us. She'd done a good job. Jesse and Ralf's rumors about me had been a result of her efforts.

But then Mia had gone with us to Spokane and been captured by the Strigoi. And, just like for Christian and Eddie, that had changed everything. She'd seen the same horrors the rest of us had. In fact, she was the only one of my friends who had witnessed Mason's death and me killing Strigoi. She had even saved my life then by using her water magic to temporarily drown one of the Strigoi. In the great Moroi argument about whether or not they should learn to fight with the guardians, she was firmly on the fighting side.

I hadn't seen Mia in almost a month, ever since Mason's funeral. In studying her, I felt like it'd been a year. I had always thought Mia looked like a doll. She was short compared to most Moroi and had young, round-cheeked features. The fact that she'd always curled her hair in perfect ringlets had sort of reinforced that image. But today, she hadn't gone to nearly that much trouble. Her golden blond hair was pulled into a ponytail, its only curl coming from a slight, natural waviness. She wore no makeup, and her face showed signs of having been outdoors a lot. Her skin looked chapped from the wind, and she had a very, very faint tan—almost unheard of for Moroi, with their aversion to sunlight. For the first time ever, she actually looked her age.

She laughed at my shock. "Come on, it hasn't been that long. You look like you don't even recognize me."

"I almost don't." We hugged, and again, it was hard to believe that she'd

once plotted ways to ruin my life. Or that I'd broken her nose. "What are you doing here?"

She beckoned us out the door. "We were just about to leave. I'll explain everything."

We went to a neighboring building. It wasn't like a mall or anything, but it did have a few businesses that the Moroi who worked and visited here needed —a handful of restaurants, some small stores, and offices that offered all sorts of services. There was also a coffee shop, and that was where Mia led us.

A coffee shop seems like an ordinary thing, but I rarely got to go to them. Sitting in a public place (or semi-public) with friends, not worrying about school . . . it was great. It reminded me of when Lissa and I had been on our own, when our entire lives hadn't been contained within a school and its rules.

"My dad works here now," she told us. "And so now I live here."

Moroi children rarely lived with their parents. They were sent off to places like St. Vladimir's, where they could grow up safely. "What about school?" I asked.

"There aren't many kids here, but there are some. Most of them are rich and have personal tutors. My dad pulled some strings and set it up so that I can go to them for different subjects. So I'm still studying the same things, just in a different way. It's actually pretty cool. Less teacher time—but more homework."

"You've been doing more than that," said Eddie. "Unless your classes are outside." He'd noticed the same things I had, and in looking at her hands as they held her latte, I could now see calluses.

She wiggled her fingers. "I made friends with some of the guardians here. They've been showing me a few things."

"That's risky," said Christian, though he sounded like he approved. "Since there's still a debate about Moroi fighting."

"You mean about Moroi fighting with magic," she corrected. "That's what's controversial. No one's really talking about Moroi fighting hand-to-hand."

"Well, they are," I said. "It's just been overshadowed by the magic controversy."

"It's not illegal," she said primly. "And until it is, I'm going to keep doing it. You think with all the events and meetings that go on around here that anyone even notices what someone like me does?" Mia's family, in addition to being non-royal, was also pretty lower class—not that there was anything wrong with that, but she had to feel the effects of that around here.

Still, I found her whole situation cheering. Mia seemed happier and more open than she had during the entire time I'd known her. She seemed . . . free. Christian spoke my thoughts before I could.

"You've changed," he said.

"We've all changed," she corrected. "Especially you, Rose. I can't quite explain it."

"I don't think there's any way the five of us couldn't have changed," Christian pointed out. A moment later he corrected himself. "Four of us."

We all fell silent, thoughts of Mason weighing us down. Being with Christian, Eddie, and Mia stirred up that grief I always tried to hide, and I

could see from their faces that they continually fought the same battle.

Conversation eventually turned toward all of us catching up on what had happened here and at the Academy. Yet I kept thinking about how Mia had said that I had changed more than the others. All I could think about was how out of control I'd felt lately, how half the time my actions and feelings didn't seem like my own. Sitting there, it almost seemed like Mia was controlled by all of her positive traits now—and I was controlled by my negative ones. Conversations with Adrian replayed through my head, reminding me about how I supposedly had such a dark, dark aura.

Maybe thinking about him summoned him, but he and Lissa eventually joined us. Their bar was probably in the same building, I realized. I'd been blocking her out and not paying much attention. Adrian hadn't completely gotten her drunk, thankfully, but she'd agreed to two drinks. I could feel a slight buzz through the bond and had to carefully shield it out.

She was as surprised as we'd been to see Mia but gave her a warm welcome and wanted to catch up. I'd heard most of this already, so I just listened and drank my chai. No coffee for me. Most guardians drank it the way Moroi drank blood, but I wouldn't touch the stuff.

"How'd your thing with the queen go?" Christian asked Lissa at one point.

"Not so bad," she said. "I mean, not great either. But she didn't yell at me or humiliate me, so that's a start."

"Stop being modest," said Adrian, putting his arm around her. "Princess Dragomir totally stood her ground. You should have seen it." Lissa laughed.

"I don't suppose she mentioned why she decided to let us come to the trial?" Christian asked stiffly. He didn't look very happy about the bonding that was taking place here—or about Adrian's arm.

Lissa's laughter faded, but she was still smiling. "Adrian did it."

"What?" Christian and I asked together.

Adrian, looking very pleased with himself, stayed quiet for a change and let Lissa do the talking. "He convinced her that we needed to be here. He apparently harassed her until she gave in."

"It's called 'persuasion,' not 'harassment,'" Adrian said. Lissa laughed again.

My own words about the queen came back to haunt me. *Who's she? Just another Ivashkov. There are a ton of them.* There were indeed. I eyed Adrian.

"How closely are you guys related?" The answer popped into my head from Lissa's. "She's your aunt."

"Great-aunt. And I'm her favorite great nephew. Well, I'm her only great nephew, but that's not important. I'd still be her favorite," he said.

"Unbelievable," said Christian.

"I'll second that," I said.

"None of you appreciate me. Why is it so hard to believe that I could make a real contribution in these dark times?" Adrian stood up. He was trying to sound outraged, but the smirk on his face indicated that he still found all of this pretty funny. "My cigarettes and I are going outside. At least they show me respect."

As soon as he left, Christian asked Lissa, "Were you getting drunk with him?"

"I'm not drunk. I only had two drinks," she said. "Since when did you get all

conservative?"

"Since Adrian became a bad influence."

"Come on! He helped us get here. No one else was able to do it. He didn't have to, but he did. And you and Rose are sitting there, still acting like he's the most evil person on the planet." That wasn't exactly true. I was mostly sitting there like I had been hit in the head, still too dumbstruck to react.

"Yeah, and I'm sure he did it out of the kindness of his heart," muttered Christian.

"Why else would he do it?"

"Oh, gee, I wonder."

Lissa's eyes widened. "You think he did it for me? You think there's something going on with us?"

"You guys drink together, practice magic together, and go to elitist events together. What would you think?"

Mia and Eddie looked like they wanted to be somewhere else. I was starting to share the feeling.

Anger burned through Lissa, hitting me like a wave of heat. She was utterly outraged. Her fury didn't even have that much to do with Adrian, really. She was more upset at the thought of Christian not trusting her. And as for him, I needed no psychic powers to understand how he was feeling. He wasn't jealous simply because she was hanging out with Adrian. Christian was still jealous that Adrian had the kind of influence to pull this off for her. It was just like what Jesse and Ralf had described, about how the right connections could open the right doors—connections that Christian didn't have.

I kneed Christian's leg, hoping he'd get the hint that he really should stop talking before things got worse. Lissa's anger was intensifying, muddled with embarrassment as she began to doubt herself and wonder if she *had* been getting too close to Adrian. The whole thing was ridiculous.

"Christian, for the love of God. If Adrian did this for anyone, it was because of me and his crazy obsession. He bragged awhile ago that he could do it, and I didn't believe it." I turned to Lissa. I needed to get her calm and diffuse those dark feelings that could cause so much trouble for her when they ran out of control. "Liss, you might not be wasted exactly, but you need to chill out for an hour before having this conversation. You're going to say something as stupid as Christian, and I'll be the one who has to deal with the mess—like always."

I'd gotten worked up and expected someone to tell me how bitchy I sounded. Instead, Lissa relaxed and offered Christian a smile. "Yeah, we should definitely talk about this later. A lot's kind of happened today."

He hesitated, then nodded. "Yeah. Sorry I jumped all over you." He returned her smile, fight patched up.

"So," Lissa asked Mia, "who have you met here?"

I stared at them in amazement, but no one seemed to notice. I'd fixed their fight, and there'd been no acknowledgment. No *Thank you, Rose, for pointing out how idiotic we're being.* It was bad enough I had to endure their romance day after day, with no consideration for how I felt. Now I was salvaging their relationship, and they didn't even realize it.

"I'll be right back," I said, interrupting Mia's description of some of the

other teenagers here. I was afraid if I sat there, I was going to say something I'd regret or maybe break a chair. Where had this rage come from?

I went outside, hoping a gulp of cold air would calm me down. Instead, I got a face full of clove smoke.

"Don't start in about the smoking," warned Adrian. He was leaning against the building's brick wall. "You didn't have to come outside. You knew I was here."

"That's actually why I'm here. Well, that, and I felt like I was going to go crazy if I stayed inside another minute."

He tilted his head to look at my face. His eyebrows shot up. "You aren't kidding, are you? What happened? You were fine a few minutes ago."

I paced across the ground in front of him. "I don't know. I *was* fine. Then Christian and Lissa started having this stupid argument over you. It was weird. They were the ones who were mad—and then I ended up madder than both of them."

"Wait. They were arguing over me?"

"Yes. I just said that. Weren't you paying attention?"

"Hey, don't snap at me. I haven't done anything to you."

I crossed my arms over my chest. "Christian's jealous because you hang around Lissa so much."

"We're studying spirit," said Adrian. "He's welcome to join in."

"Yeah, well, no one ever said love was reasonable. Seeing you come back together kind of set him off. And then he got upset because you pulled rank with the queen for Lissa."

"I didn't do it for her. I did it for all of you—but, well, you especially."

I came to a halt in front of him. "I didn't believe you. That you could do it."

He grinned. "Guess you should have listened to my family history in that dream after all."

"I guess. I just thought . . ."

I couldn't finish. I'd thought Dimitri would be the one who came through for me, the one who—despite what he said—could make almost anything happen. But he hadn't.

"Thought what?" Adrian prompted.

"Nothing." With much effort, I managed to utter the next words. "Thank you for helping us."

"Oh my God," he said. "A kind word from Rose Hathaway. I can die a happy man."

"What are you saying? That I'm normally an ungrateful bitch?"

He just looked at me.

"Hey! Not cool."

"Maybe you could redeem yourself with a hug."

I glared.

"A small one?" he begged.

With a sigh, I walked over and put one arm around Adrian, leaning my head lightly against his arm. "Thanks, Adrian."

We stood like that for a heartbeat. I felt none of the crazy electricity or connection I did with Dimitri, but I had to admit that Lissa had been right about something. Adrian was annoying and arrogant at times, but he really

wasn't the bastard I often made him out to be.

The doors opened, and Lissa and the others stepped outside. They understandably looked surprised, but I didn't care just then. Besides, they probably all thought I was pregnant with Adrian's love child, so what did it matter? I backed away.

"Heading out?" I asked.

"Yeah, Mia's got more important things to do than hang out with us," joked Christian.

"Hey, I just told my dad I'd meet him. I'll see you guys before I leave." She started to walk away, then abruptly turned around. "God, I'm so out of it." She reached into her coat pocket and handed me a folded piece of paper. "This is half the reason I found you guys. One of the court clerks wanted me to give this to you."

"Thanks," I said, puzzled. She headed off to see her dad while the rest of us strolled back to our accommodations.

I slowed my pace as I opened the note, wondering who in the world here would want to contact me.

Rose,

I was so happy to hear about your arrival. I'm sure it'll make tomorrow's proceedings that much more entertaining. I've been curious for quite some time about how Vasilisa is doing, and your romantic escapades are always an amusing diversion. I can't wait to share them in the courtroom tomorrow.

Best,
V. D.

"Who's it from?" asked Eddie, coming up beside me.

I hastily folded it up and shoved it into my pocket. "No one," I replied.

No one indeed.

V. D.

Victor Dashkov.

THIRTEEN

WHEN WE GOT BACK to our rooms, I made up an excuse to Lissa about how I needed to go take care of some guardian stuff. She was eager to patch up the earlier conflict with Christian—probably in the form of clothing removal—and didn't ask any questions. There was a phone in my room, and after calling an operator, I was able to find out which room was Dimitri's.

He was surprised to see me at his door—and a little wary. The last time this had happened, I'd been under the influence of Victor's lust charm and had behaved . . . aggressively.

"I have to talk to you," I said.

He let me come in, and I immediately handed over the note.

"V. D.—"

"Yeah, I know," said Dimitri. He handed the note back. "Victor Dashkov."

"What are we going to do? I mean, we talked about this, but now he really is saying he's going to sell us out."

Dimitri didn't answer, and I could tell he was assessing every angle of this, just like he would a fight. Finally, he pulled out his cell phone, which was a lot cooler than having to rely on the room's phone. "Give me a moment."

I started to sit on his bed, decided that was dangerous, and instead sat on the couch. I didn't know who he was calling, but the conversation took place in Russian.

"What's going on?" I asked when he finished.

"I'll let you know soon. For now, we have to wait."

"Great. My favorite thing to do."

He dragged an armchair up and sat opposite me. It seemed too small for someone as tall as him, but, as always, he managed to make it work and appear graceful in the process.

Beside me was one of the Western novels he always carried around. I picked it up, again thinking about how alone he was. Even now, at the Court, he'd chosen to stay in his room. "Why do you read these?"

"Some people read books for fun," he observed.

"Hey, watch the dig. And I do read books. I read them to solve mysteries that threaten my best friend's life and sanity. I don't think reading this cowboy stuff is really saving the world like I do."

He took it from me and flipped it over, face thoughtful and not as intense as usual. "Like any book, it's an escape. And there's something . . . mmm. I don't know. Something appealing about the Old West. No rules. Everyone just lives by their own code. You don't have to be tied down by others' ideas of right and wrong in order to bring justice."

"Wait," I laughed. "I thought I was the one who wanted to break rules."

"I didn't say I wanted to. Just that I can see the appeal."

"You can't fool me, comrade. You want to put on a cowboy hat and keep lawless bank robbers in line."

"No time. I have enough trouble keeping you in line."

I grinned, and suddenly, it was a lot like when we cleaned the church—before the fight, at least. Easy. Comfortable. In fact, it was a lot like the old days when we'd first begun training together, way back before everything had gotten so complicated. Well, okay . . . things had always been complicated, but for a while, they'd been less complicated. It made me sad. I wished we could relive those early days. There'd been no Victor Dashkov, no blood on my hands.

"I'm sorry," Dimitri said all of a sudden.

"For what? Reading cheesy novels?"

"For not being able to get you here. I feel like I let you down." I glimpsed a shadow of worry on his face, like he was concerned he might have caused some irreparable damage.

The apology totally caught me off guard. For a moment, I wondered if he was jealous of Adrian's influence in the same way Christian had been. Then I realized it was completely different. I'd been giving Dimitri a hard time because I'd been convinced he could do anything. Somewhere—deep inside—he felt the same, at least where I was concerned. He didn't want to deny me anything. My earlier bad mood had long since vanished, and I suddenly just felt drained. And stupid.

"You didn't," I told him. "I acted like a total brat. You've never let me down before. You didn't let me down with this."

The grateful look he gave me made me feel as if I had wings. If another moment had passed, I suspected he would have said something so sweet that I would have flown away. Instead, his phone rang.

Another conversation in Russian took place, and then he stood up. "All right, let's go."

"Where?"

"To see Victor Dashkov."

It turned out that Dimitri had a friend who had a friend, and somehow, despite the best security in the Moroi world, we managed to get into the

Court's prison facilities.

"Why are we doing this?" I whispered as we walked down the hall toward Victor's cell. I'd really, really hoped for stone walls and torches, but the place looked very modern and efficient, with marble floors and stark white walls. At least there were no windows. "You think we can talk him out of it?"

Dimitri shook his head. "If Victor wanted to take revenge on us, he'd just do it without any warning. He doesn't do things without a reason. The fact that he told you first means he wants something, and now we're going to find out what it is."

We reached Victor's cell. He was the only prisoner currently being held. Like the rest of the facility, his room reminded me of something you'd find at a hospital. Everything was clean, bright, and sterile—and very bare. It was a place without any sort of stimulus or distraction whatsoever, which would have driven me crazy in one hour. The cell had silvery bars that looked very hard to break, which was the most important part.

Victor sat in a chair, idly examining his nails. It had been three months since our last meeting, and seeing him again made my skin crawl. Feelings I hadn't known were buried in me suddenly burst to the surface.

One of the hardest things of all was seeing him look so healthy and young. He'd bought that health by torturing Lissa, and I hated him for it. If his disease had run its normal course, he might be dead by now.

He had receding black hair, with only the slightest touch of silver. He was in his forties and had a regal, almost handsome cut to his face. He glanced up at our approach. Eyes the same pale jade as Lissa's met mine. The Dragomir and Dashkov families had a lot of intertwined history, and it was creepy seeing that eye color in someone else. A smile lit his face.

"Oh my. This is a treat. Lovely Rosemarie, practically an adult now." His eyes flicked toward Dimitri. "Of course, some have been treating you that way for quite a while."

I pressed my face to the bars. "Stop screwing with us, you son of a bitch. What do you want?"

Dimitri put a gentle hand on my shoulder and pulled me back. "Easy, Rose."

I took a deep breath and then slowly stepped backward. Victor straightened up in his chair and laughed.

"After all this time, your cub still hasn't learned any control. But then, maybe you never really wanted her to."

"We aren't here to banter," said Dimitri calmly. "You wanted to lure Rose over, and now we need to know why."

"Does there have to be some sinister reason? I just wanted to know how she was doing, and something tells me we aren't going to have a chance for any friendly chats tomorrow." That annoying smirk stayed on his face, and I decided then that he was lucky to be behind bars and out of my reach.

"We're not going to have a friendly chat now," I growled.

"You think I'm joking, but I'm not. I really do want to know how you're doing. You've always been a fascinating subject to me, Rosemarie. The only shadow-kissed person we know of. I told you before, that isn't the kind of thing you walk away from unscathed. There's no way you can quietly sink into the regimented routine of academic life. People like you aren't meant to blend

in."

"I'm not some kind of science experiment."

He acted like I hadn't said anything. "What's it been like? What have you noticed?"

"There's no time for this. If you don't get to the point," warned Dimitri, "we're going to leave."

I didn't understand how Dimitri could sound so calm. I leaned forward and gave Victor my coldest smile. "There's no way they'll let you off tomorrow. I hope you enjoy prison. I bet it'll be great once you get sick again—and you will, you know."

Victor regarded me levelly, still with that amused look that made me want to choke him. "All things die, Rose. Well, except for you, I suppose. Or maybe you are dead. I don't know. Those who visit the world of the dead can probably never fully shake their connection to it."

There was a snarky retort on my lips, but something held me back. *Those who visit the world of the dead.* What if my Mason sightings weren't because I was crazy or because he was seeking revenge? What if there was something about me—something that had happened when I'd died and come back—that was now connecting me to Mason? It was Victor who had first explained what it meant to be shadow-kissed. I wondered now if he had any of the answers I'd been looking for.

My face must have given away something, because Victor gave me a speculative look. "Yes? There's something you'd like to say?"

I hated to ask him for anything. It made my stomach turn. Swallowing my pride, I asked, "What is the world of the dead? Is it heaven or hell?"

"Neither," he said.

"What lives there?" I exclaimed. "Ghosts? Will I go back? Do things come out of it?"

Victor was taking great pleasure in me having to come to him for information, just as I'd feared he would. I saw that smirk intensify.

"Well, clearly some things come out of it, because here you stand before us."

"He's baiting you," said Dimitri. "Let it go."

Victor gave Dimitri a brief glare. "I'm *helping* her." He turned back to me. "Honestly? I don't know that much about it. You're the one who has been there, Rose. Not me. Not yet. Someday, you'll probably be the one educating me. I'm sure the more you deal death out, the closer you'll become to it."

"Enough," said Dimitri, voice harsh. "We're going."

"Wait, wait," said Victor, voice congenial. "You haven't told me about Vasilisa yet."

I moved forward again. "Stay away from her. She doesn't have anything to do with this."

Victor gave me a dry look. "Seeing as I'm locked away here, I have no choice but to stay away from her, my dear. And you're wrong—Vasilisa has everything to do with everything."

"That's it," I said, suddenly getting it. "That's why you sent the note. You wanted me here because you wanted to know about her, and you knew there was no way she'd come talk to you herself. You had nothing to blackmail her

with."

"*Blackmail*'s an ugly word."

"There's no way you're going to see her—at least outside of the courtroom. She's never going to heal you. I told you: You're going to get sick again, and you're going to die. You're going to be the one sending me postcards from the other side."

"You think that's what this is about? You think my needs are that petty?" The mockery was gone, replaced by a feverish and almost fanatical look in his green eyes. The tight set of his mouth stretched the skin of his face a little, and I noticed he'd lost weight since our last encounter. Maybe prison had been harder on him than I'd thought. "You've forgotten everything, why I did what I did. You've been so caught up in your own shortsightedness that you missed the big picture I was looking at."

I racked my brain, thinking back to that time last fall. He was right. My focus had been on the wrongs he'd committed against Lissa and me personally. I'd forgotten other conversations, his insane explanations of his grand scheme.

"You wanted to stage a revolution—still want to. That's crazy. It's not going to happen," I said.

"It's already happening. Do you think I don't know what's going on out in the world? I still have contacts. People can be bought off—how do you think I was able to send you that message? I know about the unrest—I know about Natasha Ozera's movement to get Moroi to fight with guardians. You stand by her and vilify me, Rosemarie, but I pushed for the very same thing last fall. Yet, somehow, you don't seem to regard her in the same way."

"Tasha Ozera is working on her cause a bit differently than you did," noted Dimitri.

"And that's why she's getting nowhere," Victor retorted. "Tatiana and her council are being held back by centuries of archaic traditions. So long as that sort of power rules us, nothing will change. We will never learn to fight. Non-royal Moroi will never have a voice. Dhampirs like you will continually be sent out to battle."

"It's what we dedicate our lives to," said Dimitri. I could sense the tension building in him. He might show better self-control than me, but I knew he was getting just as frustrated here.

"And it's what you lose your lives for. You're all but enslaved and don't even realize it. And for what? Why do you protect us?"

"Because . . . we need you," I faltered. "For our race to survive."

"You don't need to throw yourselves into battle for that. Making children isn't really that difficult."

I ignored his quip. "And because the Moroi . . . the Moroi and their magic are important. They can do amazing things."

Victor threw his hands up in exasperation. "We *used* to do amazing things. Humans used to revere us as gods, but over time, we grew lazy. The advent of technology made our magic more and more obsolete. Now, all we do is parlor tricks."

"If you have so many ideas," said Dimitri, with a dangerous glint in his dark eyes, "then do something useful in prison and write a manifesto."

"And what's this have to do with Lissa anyway?" I asked.

"Because Vasilisa is a vehicle for change."

I stared incredulously. "You think she's going to lead your revolution?"

"Well, I'd prefer that I lead it—someday. But, regardless, I think that she's going to be part of it. I've heard about her too. She's a rising star—still young, certainly, but people are taking notice. All royals aren't created equal, you know. The Dragomir symbol is a dragon, the king of the beasts. Likewise, the Dragomir blood has always been powerful—that's why the Strigoi have targeted them so consistently. A Dragomir returning to power is no small thing—particularly one such as her. My impression from the reports is that she must have mastered her magic. If that's so—with her gifts—there's no telling what she could do. People are drawn to her with almost no effort on her part. And when she actually tries to influence them . . . well, they'll do anything she wants." His eyes were wide as he spoke, wonder and happiness on his face as he imagined Lissa living out his dreams.

"Unbelievable," I said. "First you wanted to hide her away to keep you alive. Now you actually want her out in the world to use her compulsion for your own psycho plans."

"I told you, she's a force for change. And like you being shadow-kissed, she's the only one of her kind that we know about. That makes her dangerous—and very valuable."

Well, that was something. Victor wasn't all-knowing after all. He didn't know about Adrian's spirit use.

"Lissa will never do it," I said. "She's not going to abuse her powers."

"And Victor's not going to say anything about us," said Dimitri, tugging my arm. "He's achieved his goal. He brought you here because he wanted to know about Lissa."

"He didn't find out much," I said.

"You'd be surprised," said Victor. He grinned at Dimitri. "And what makes you so certain I won't enlighten the world about your romantic indiscretions?"

"Because it won't save you from prison. And if you ruin Rose, you'll destroy whatever weak chance you had of Lissa helping you with your warped fantasy." Victor flinched just a little; Dimitri was right. Dimitri stepped forward, pressing close to the bars as I had earlier. I'd thought I had a scary voice, but when he spoke his next words, I realized I wasn't even close. "And it'll all be pointless anyway, because you won't stay alive long enough in prison to stage your grand plans. You aren't the only one with connections."

My breath caught a little. Dimitri brought so many things to my life: love, comfort, and instruction. I got so used to him sometimes that I forgot just how dangerous he could be. As he stood there, tall and threatening while he glared down at Victor, I felt a chill run down my spine. I remembered how when I had first come to the Academy, people had said Dimitri was a god. In this moment, he looked it.

If Victor was frightened by Dimitri's threat, he didn't show it. His jade green eyes glanced between the two of us. "You two are a match made in heaven. Or somewhere."

"See you in court," I said.

Dimitri and I left. On our way out, he said a few words in Russian to the guardian on duty. From their manners, my guess was Dimitri was offering

thanks.

We ventured outdoors, walking across a wide, beautiful parklike space to get back to our rooms. The sleet had stopped, and it had left everything—buildings and trees alike—coated in ice. It was like the world was made of glass. Glancing at Dimitri, I saw him staring straight ahead. It was hard to tell while walking, but I could have sworn he was shaking.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Yes."

"You sure?"

"As okay as I can be."

"Do you think he'll tell everyone about us?"

"No."

We walked in silence for a bit. I finally asked the question I'd been dying to know.

"Did you mean it . . . that if Victor did tell . . . that you'd . . ." I couldn't finish. I couldn't bring myself to say the words *have him killed*.

"I don't have much influence in the upper levels of Moroi royalty, but I have plenty among the guardians who handle the dirty work in our world."

"You didn't answer the question. If you'd really do it."

"I'd do a lot of things to protect you, Roza."

My heart pounded. He only used "Roza" when he was feeling particularly affectionate toward me.

"It wouldn't exactly be protecting me. It'd be after the fact—cold-blooded. You don't do that kind of thing," I told him. "Revenge is more my thing. I'll have to kill him."

I meant it as a joke, but he didn't think it was funny. "Don't talk like that. And anyway, it doesn't matter. Victor's not going to say anything."

He left me to go to his own room when we got inside. As I was opening the door to mine, Lissa rounded the hall corner.

"There you are. What happened? You missed dinner."

I'd completely forgotten. "Sorry . . . got carried away with some guardian stuff. It's a long story."

She'd changed for dinner. Her hair was still pulled up, and she now wore a form-fitting dress made out of silver raw silk. She looked beautiful. She looked royal. I thought about Victor's words and wondered if she really could be the power for change he swore she was. Looking like she did now, so glamorous and self-composed, I could imagine people following her anywhere. I certainly would, but then, I was biased.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" she asked with a small smile.

I couldn't tell her that I'd just seen the man who frightened her the most. I couldn't tell her that while she'd been out living it up, I'd been off watching her back in the shadows, like I would always do.

Instead, I returned her smile. "I like the dress."

FOURTEEN

ABOUT A HALF HOUR before my alarm was scheduled to go off the next morning, I heard a knock at my door. I expected it to be Lissa, but a sleepy check of our bond showed that she was still fast asleep. Puzzled, I staggered out of the bed and opened the door. A Moroi girl I didn't recognize handed me some folded clothes with a note attached. I wondered if I should tip her or something, but she left too quickly for me to react.

I sat back on my bed and unfolded the clothing. Black slacks, white blouse, and a black jacket. It was the same ensemble that the other guardians wore around here, and it was in my size. Wow. I was about to become part of the team. A slow grin spread over my face, and I opened the note. It was in Dimitri's writing: *Wear your hair up*.

The grin stayed on my face. A lot of female guardians cut their hair to show off their *molnija* marks. I'd reluctantly considered it once, and Dimitri had told me not to. He loved my hair and had told me to wear it up. The way he'd said it back then had given me chills, just like now.

An hour later, I was on my way to the trial with Lissa, Christian, and Eddie. Someone had rustled up a black-and-white outfit for Eddie too, and I think we both kind of felt like kids playing dress-up with their parents' clothing. My cropped jacket and stretchy blouse were actually pretty cute, and I wondered if I'd be able to bring these back with me.

The courtroom was over in the large, ornate building we'd passed upon arrival. Walking through its halls, I saw a mix of the old and the new. Outside, it was all arched windows and stone spires. Inside, it was a hub of modern activity. People worked in offices with flat-screen monitors. Elevators led to upper floors. Yet, despite that, a few antique touches could still be found. Sculptures on pedestals. Chandeliers in the halls.

The courtroom itself had beautiful murals that stretched from floor to ceiling, and in the front of the room, seals from all the royal families hung on the walls. Lissa stopped as we walked in, her eyes falling on the Dragomir dragon. *King of the beasts.* A sea of conflicting emotions swirled within her as she stared at the seal and felt the full weight of being the only one left to carry on her name. Pride to be part of that family. Fear that she wouldn't be good enough to live up to the name. Giving her a gentle nudge, I urged her on toward our seats.

The seating was split by an aisle down the middle of the room. We sat at the front of the right-hand section. There were still several minutes to go before proceedings began, but the room wasn't very full yet. I suspected that wouldn't change, due to the secrecy surrounding what had happened with Victor. A judge sat at the front, but there was no jury. An elevated seat on one side of the room marked where the queen would sit when she arrived. She would be the one who made the ultimate decision. That was how it worked with royal criminal cases.

I pointed it out to Lissa. "Let's hope that she's against him. Looks like she'll be the only one making the decision."

Lissa frowned. "Not having a jury feels kind of weird."

"That's because we spent so much time around humans."

She smiled. "Maybe. I don't know. Just seems like there's a lot of room for corruption."

"Well, yeah. But this is Victor we're talking about."

Moments later, Prince Victor Dashkov himself entered the courtroom. Or, rather, just Victor Dashkov did. He'd been stripped of his title when he'd been imprisoned. It had gone to the next oldest person in the Dashkov family.

Fear shot through Lissa, and the little color that was in her cheeks completely disappeared. Mingled with that fear was an emotion I hadn't expected: regret. Before he'd kidnapped her, Victor had been like an uncle to her—that was even how she'd referred to him. She'd loved him, and he'd betrayed her. I put my hand over hers. "Easy," I murmured. "It's going to be okay."

His eyes, narrowed and cunning, looked around the courtroom as though it were a party. He had that same unconcerned look he'd had while talking to Dimitri and me. I felt my lips curl into a sneer. A red haze tinged my vision, and I worked hard to be as serene as the other guardians in the room. He finally focused on Lissa, and she flinched at seeing the same eye color she and others of her family had. When he nodded a sort of greeting to her, I felt my control snap. Before I could actually do anything, I felt new words in my mind —Lissa's. *Breathe, Rose. Just breathe.* It looked like we were going to have to rely on each other to get through this. A heartbeat later, Victor was walking again, off to take his seat on the left side of the room.

"Thanks," I said to her, once he was gone. "It's like you can read my mind."

"No," she said gently. "I could just feel your hand."

I looked down at where I'd put my hand over hers. I'd done it to comfort her and had ended up clenching her fingers in my own agitation. "Yikes," I said, jerking away and hoping I hadn't broken her bones. "Sorry."

Queen Tatiana's entrance followed his, which distracted me and helped

calm my dark feelings. We all stood when she appeared and then knelt. It was all kind of archaic, but it was a custom the Moroi had held onto over the years. We didn't rise until she took her seat, and then the rest of us were able to sit too.

The trial started. One by one, those who had witnessed the events with Victor gave their account of what they'd seen. Largely, this involved the guardians who had pursued Lissa when Victor had taken her away and who had subsequently been part of the raid on Victor's hideout.

Dimitri was the last of the guardians to go. On the surface, his testimony wasn't much different than theirs. They'd all been part of the rescue squad, but his part in the story had begun a little earlier.

"I was with my student, Rose Hathaway," he said. "She shares a bond with the princess and was the first to sense what had happened."

Victor's lawyer—I couldn't even imagine how they'd gotten anyone to represent him—glanced at some papers and then looked back up at Dimitri. "Based on the events, it sounds like there was a delay between when she discovered that and when you alerted the others."

Dimitri nodded, his mask of composure never slipping. "She couldn't act on it because Mr. Dashkov had inflicted a charm on her, one that caused her to attack me." He spoke the words so levelly, it amazed me. Not even the lawyer seemed to notice anything. Only I could see—or maybe it was just because I *knew* him—how much it hurt for Dimitri to lie. Oh, he wanted to protect us—wanted to protect me in particular—which was why he was doing this. But it killed a piece of him to stand up there, under oath, and lie. Dimitri was not perfect, no matter how much I thought he was some days, but he always tried to be truthful. Today he couldn't be.

"Mr. Dashkov works with earth magic, and some who use that power and are strong in compulsion can influence our base instincts," continued Dimitri. "In this case, he affected her anger and violence through an object."

Off to my left, I heard a sound—like someone choking on their own laughter. The judge, an elderly but fierce Moroi woman, glared.

"Mr. Dashkov, please respect the decorum of this courtroom."

Victor, still smiling, waved his hands in apology. "I'm terribly sorry, Your Honor and Your Majesty. Something in Guardian Belikov's testimony just tickled my fancy, that's all. It won't happen again."

I held my breath, waiting for the blow to fall. It didn't. Dimitri finished his statement, and then Christian was called up. His part was short. He'd been with Lissa when she'd been taken and had been knocked out. His contribution was being able to ID some of Victor's guardians as the kidnappers. Once Christian sat down, it was my turn.

I walked up, hoping I looked calm in front of all those eyes—and in front of Victor. In fact, I went out of my way to not look at him at all. As I said my name and gave my oath to tell the truth, I suddenly felt the full force of what Dimitri must have experienced. I was standing before all these people, swearing I'd be honest, but I would lie in an instant if the lust charm came up.

My version was pretty straightforward. I had details to offer from before the night of the kidnapping, like about when Victor had laid his sick traps to test Lissa's power. Otherwise, my story lined up with Dimitri's and the other

guardians'.

I'd said before that I could lie well, and I brushed over the "attack" charm part with such ease that no one paid any attention. Except Victor. Despite my refusal to look at him, I inadvertently glanced in his direction when I mentioned the charm. His eyes bored into me, and a small smirk sat on his lips. His smugness, I realized, was more than just because he knew I was lying. It was also because he actually knew the precise truth—and the look he gave me told me that he had that power over me and Dimitri, the power to ruin everything for us in front of all these people—no matter what Dimitri had threatened. All the while, I kept my face calm enough to make Dimitri proud, but inside my chest, my heart thudded loudly.

It seemed to last forever, but I knew I was only on the stand for a few minutes. I finished, sagging with relief that Victor hadn't called me out, and then it was Lissa's turn. As the victim, she offered the first new perspective thus far, and everyone there grew caught up in her story. It was compelling; no one had ever heard anything like it. I also realized that, without even trying, Lissa was using her spirit-induced charisma. I think it came from the same place compulsion did. People were enraptured and sympathetic. When Lissa described the torture Victor had put her through to force her to heal him, I saw faces go pale with shock. Even Tatiana's stern mask faltered a little, though whether she felt pity or just simple surprise, I couldn't say.

The most amazing thing, though, was how calmly Lissa managed to deliver the story. On the outside, she was steady and beautiful. But as she spoke the words, describing exactly how Victor's henchman had tortured her, she relived the pain and terror of that night. The guy had been an air user, and he'd toyed with that element, sometimes taking it away so she couldn't breathe and at other times smothering her with it. It had been horrible, and I'd experienced it right along with her. In fact, I experienced it with her again now as she spoke about the events on the stand. Each painful detail was still etched in her mind, the pain echoing back to both of us. We were both relieved when her testimony finished.

Finally, it was Victor's turn. From the look on his face, you never would have guessed he was on trial. He wasn't angry or outraged. He wasn't contrite. He didn't plead. He looked like we were all hanging out somewhere, like he had nothing in the world to worry about. Somehow, that made me that much angrier.

Even when answering, he spoke as though he made perfect sense. When the prosecuting lawyer asked why he'd done what he had, he looked at her as though she were crazy.

"Why, I had no choice," he said pleasantly. "I was dying. No one was going to condone me openly experimenting with the princess's powers. What would you have done in my place?"

The lawyer ignored that. She was having a hard time keeping the disgust off of her face. "And you found coaxing your own daughter into turning Strigoi also necessary?"

Everyone in the courtroom shifted uncomfortably. One of the most awful things about Strigoi was that they were made, not born. A Strigoi could force a human, a dhampir, or a Moroi into becoming Strigoi if the Strigoi drank the

victim's blood and then fed Strigoi blood back to the victim. It didn't matter if the victim wanted it or not, and once she became Strigoi, she lost all sense of her old, moral self. She embraced becoming a monster and killing others to survive. Strigoi converted others if they found someone they thought would strengthen their ranks. Sometimes they did it just out of cruelty.

The other way a Strigoi could be made was if a Moroi willingly chose to kill another person during feeding, destroying all the magic and life within themselves. Christian's parents had done that because they'd wanted to be immortal, no matter the cost. Victor's daughter Natalie had done it because he had talked her into it. The extra strength and speed she'd gotten from being a Strigoi had helped her free him, and he'd felt his goals were worth the sacrifice.

Again, Victor showed no remorse. His answer was simple. "Natalie made that decision."

"Can you say that about everyone you used to meet your ends? Guardian Belikov and Miss Hathaway had no say in what you made them do."

Victor chuckled. "Well, that's a matter of opinion. I honestly don't think they minded. But if you have time after this case, Your Honor, you might want to consider trying a statutory rape case."

I froze. He'd done it. He'd really done it. I expected everyone in the room to turn and point at Dimitri and me. No one even looked in our direction, though. Most people were giving Victor appalled looks. I realized that was exactly what Victor had known would happen. He just wanted to tease us; he didn't actually expect anyone to take him seriously. Lissa's feelings through the bond confirmed as much. She felt like Victor was trying to shift attention off of himself by making up stories about Dimitri and me. She was horrified that Victor would stoop so low.

The judge was too, and she chastised Victor for getting off topic. By that point, most of the questioning was done. The lawyers wrapped up, and it was time for the queen to deliver her verdict. I held my breath again, wondering what she would do. He hadn't denied any of the charges. The evidence was overwhelming, thanks to my friends' testimonies, but as even Victor had pointed out, there was a lot of corruption among royals. The queen could very well decide that she didn't want the scandal involved with imprisoning someone so well known. Even if no one knew the details, his imprisonment would start a buzz. Maybe she didn't want to deal with that. Maybe Victor had bought her off too.

But in the end, she found Victor guilty and sentenced him to life in prison—a different prison, not the one at Court. I'd heard stories about Moroi prisons, and they were terrible places. I suspected his new home would be very different from the cell we'd found him in. Victor remained calm and amused throughout it all, just as he had yesterday. I didn't like that. The conversation I'd had with him made me think he wasn't going to accept this as serenely as he pretended. I hoped they'd watch him closely.

A gesture from the queen ended formalities. The rest of us stood up and began talking while she surveyed the room with a sharp eye, probably taking notes. Victor's escort started to lead him out. He passed by us again. This time, he stopped and spoke.

"Vasilisa, I trust you've been well."

She didn't answer. She still hated and feared him, but with this verdict, she finally believed he could no longer hurt her. It was like the end of a chapter she'd been stuck in for months. She could finally move on and hopefully let those horrible memories fade.

"I'm sorry we didn't get a chance to talk, but I'm sure we will next time," he added.

"Come on," said one of the guardians with him. They led him away.

"He's crazy," muttered Lissa once he was gone. "I can't believe he said that stuff about you and Dimitri."

Dimitri was standing behind her. I looked up and met his eyes as he moved past us. His relief mirrored my own. We'd danced with danger today—and we'd won.

Christian came up to her and hugged her, holding her for a long time. I watched them fondly, surprised at my own kind feelings for them. When a hand touched my arm, I jumped. It was Adrian.

"You okay, little dhampir?" he asked softly. "Dashkov said a few . . . uh . . . suggestive things."

I stepped closer, keeping my voice low as well. "No one believed him. I think it's okay. Thanks for asking, though."

He smiled and tapped my nose. "Two thank-yous in as many days. I don't suppose I'll get to see any, uh, special gratitude?"

I scoffed. "Nope. You'll just have to imagine it."

He gave me a half-hug and released me. "Fair enough. But I have a good imagination."

We started to leave, and then Priscilla Voda hurried over to Lissa. "The queen would like to meet with you before you leave. In private."

I glanced over to the raised chair where the queen sat. Her gaze was fixed on us, and I wondered what this could be about.

"Sure," said Lissa, as confused as I was. To me, she sent through the bond: *Will you listen again?*

I gave her a quick nod before Priscilla spirited her off. I returned to my room, tuning in to Lissa while I packed my things up. It took a little while because Tatiana had to finish a few courtroom formalities, but she finally arrived in the same room as yesterday. Lissa and Priscilla bowed as she entered and waited for the queen to sit.

Tatiana made herself comfortable. "Vasilisa, you need to be in the air soon, so I'll make this brief. I would like to make an offer to you."

"What kind of an offer, Your Majesty?"

"You'll need to go to college soon." She spoke like it was a done deal. And yeah, Lissa did plan on going to college, but I didn't like the presumption. "I understand you're dissatisfied with your choices."

"Well . . . it's not that I'm dissatisfied, exactly. It's just, all the places Moroi are supposed to go are small. I mean, I understand it's for safety, but I don't know. I'd like to go somewhere bigger. Somewhere prestigious." Guardians monitored a handful of select colleges in the country so that Moroi could safely attend them. As Lissa had noted, though, they tended to be smaller schools.

Tatiana nodded impatiently, like she already knew this. “I’m going to give you an opportunity that no one else has ever been given, to my knowledge. After graduation, I would like you to come live here, at the Royal Court. You have no family, and I think you’d benefit from learning politics right in the heart of our government. Along with this, we would make arrangements for you to attend Lehigh University. It’s less than an hour from here. Have you heard of it?”

Lissa nodded. I’d never heard of it, but she was enough of a nerd to have researched every college in the U.S. “It’s a good school, Your Majesty. But . . . still small.”

“It’s bigger than the ones Moroi usually attend,” she pointed out.

“True.” In her mind, Lissa was trying to puzzle out what was going on here. Why was Tatiana making this offer? Especially considering how she’d seemed to disagree with Lissa earlier. There was something weird going on here, and she decided to see how far she could push it. “The University of Pennsylvania isn’t that far either, Your Majesty.”

“That school is *enormous*, Vasilisa. We couldn’t ensure your safety there.”

Lissa shrugged. “Well, then it probably doesn’t matter if I go to Lehigh or one of the others.”

The queen looked shocked. So did Priscilla. They couldn’t believe Lissa seemed indifferent to the offer. Truthfully, Lissa wasn’t indifferent. Lehigh was a step up from what she’d expected, and she wanted to go. But she also wanted to see how badly the queen wanted her to go.

Tatiana frowned and appeared to be weighing matters. “Depending on your grades and experiences at Lehigh, we could possibly arrange for you to transfer in a couple years. Again, the safety logistics would be very difficult.”

Wow. The queen did want her around. But why? Lissa decided to simply ask.

“I’m very flattered, Your Majesty. And grateful. But why are you offering me this?”

“As the last Dragomir, you’re a precious commodity. I’d like to make sure your future is secure. And I do so hate to see bright minds wasted. Besides . . .” She paused, hesitant to speak her next words. “You were right to a certain extent. The Moroi do have trouble changing. It could be useful to have a dissenting voice around here.”

Lissa didn’t answer right away. She was still analyzing this offer from every possible angle. She wished I was there to advise her, but I wasn’t sure I’d have much of an opinion. Splitting my guardian duty between the Court and a cool university could be pretty neat. On the other hand, we’d have more freedom elsewhere. In the end, Lissa decided in favor of higher education.

“All right,” she said at last. “I accept. Thank you, Your Majesty.”

“Excellent,” said Tatiana. “We’ll see that the arrangements are made. You may go now.”

The queen made no signs of moving, so Lissa bowed again and scurried to the door, still reeling with this news. Tatiana suddenly called out to her.

“Vasilisa? Will you send your friend here to talk to me? The Hathaway girl?”

“Rose?” she asked in astonishment. “Why do you—? Yes, of course. I’ll get

her."

Lissa hurried toward guest housing, but I met her halfway. "What's going on?" I asked.

"I have no idea," said Lissa. "Did you hear what she said?"

"Yup. Maybe she wants to tell me how I have to be extra careful with you going to that school."

"Maybe. I don't know." Lissa gave me a quick hug. "Good luck. I'll see you soon."

I went to the same room and found Tatiana standing with her hands clasped, posture stiff and impatient. She was dressed like a corporate businesswoman again, with a sleek brown blazer and skirt set. That color wouldn't have been my first choice to go with her dark gray hair, but that was her style adviser's problem, not mine.

I bowed just as Lissa had and glanced around the room. Priscilla was gone; only a couple guardians remained. I expected Tatiana to tell me to sit, but instead, she stood up and walked right over to me. Her face did not look happy.

"Miss Hathaway," she said sharply, "I'm going to keep this brief. You are going to stop this atrocious affair you're having with my great-nephew. Immediately."

FIFTEEN

"I . . . WHAT?"

"You heard me. I don't know how far things have gone, and honestly, I really don't want to know the details. That's not the point. The point is that it's going to go no farther."

The queen was looking down on me, hands on her hips, clearly waiting for me to swear I'd do whatever she wanted. Except I kind of couldn't. I glanced around the room, certain this was some sort of joke. I looked to the two guardians across the room, half-hoping they'd explain what was going on, but they were doing that seeing-without-actually-seeing thing. No eye contact. I turned back to the queen.

"Um, Your Majesty . . . there's been some kind of mistake. There's nothing going on between Adrian and me."

"Do you think I'm an idiot?" she asked.

Wow. That was an opening.

"No, Your Majesty."

"Well, that's a start. There's no point in lying to me. People have seen you together, here and back at your school. *I* saw you myself in the courtroom." Damn it. Why had Adrian chosen that moment to be chivalrous and sneak another hug? "I've heard all the illicit details about what's going on, and it is going to stop right here, right now. Adrian Ivashkov is not going to run off with some cheap dhampir girl, so you might as well rid yourself of that delusion right now."

"I never thought he was going to—seeing as how we're not involved," I said. "I mean, we're friends, that's all. He likes me. He's a flirt. And if you want to talk illicit stuff, then . . . yeah, I'm pretty sure he's got a list of illicit things he'd like to do with me. Lots of illicit things. But we're not doing them. Your

Majesty."

As soon as the words left my mouth, I felt like an idiot. From the look on her face, however, it didn't seem like things could really get any worse for me.

"I know about you," she said. "All anyone talks about are your recent awards and accolades, but I haven't forgotten that it was *you* who took Vasilisa away. I also know about the trouble you used to get into—I know about the drinking, about the men. If it was up to me, I'd pack you up and send you off to some blood whore commune. You'd probably fit in well."

Drinking and men? She made me sound like an alcoholic prostitute when, honestly, I'd probably drunk no more than other teenagers at high school parties. Telling her this seemed useless, though. Pointing out that I was still a virgin probably wouldn't have made much of a difference either.

"But," she continued, "your recent . . . achievements make sending you away impossible. Everyone believes you have some glorious future ahead of you. Maybe you do. Regardless, if I can't stop you from being a guardian, I *can* affect whose guardian you are."

I stiffened. "What are you saying? Are you threatening me?" I spoke the words tentatively, not as a challenge. She couldn't be serious. Taking me away from Lissa during the field experience was one thing, but we were talking about an entirely different matter now.

"I'm just saying I have a great interest in Vasilisa's future, that's all. And if I have to protect her from corrupting influences, I will. We can find her another guardian. We can find you another Moroi."

"You can't do that!" I exclaimed. I could tell by the look on her face that she was happy to finally get a real reaction out of me. I was both angry and afraid, and I fought hard against my normal explosive instincts. Diplomacy and honesty were what I needed now. "I'm not doing anything with Adrian. Really. You can't punish me for something I'm not doing." I quickly remembered to add: "Your Majesty."

"I don't want to punish you at all, Rose. I just want to make sure we understand each other. Moroi men don't marry dhampir girls. They play with them. Every girl thinks it's going to be different with her—even your mother did with Ibrahim, but she was wrong too."

"With who?" I asked, the name hitting me like a slap in the face. Ibrahim? I'd never even heard of that name, let alone someone called that. I wanted to ask who he was and what his connection to my mother was, but Tatiana just kept talking.

"They're always wrong. And you can try your hardest to change that, but it's a waste of time." She shook her head, like she felt sorry for these dhampir girls, but her smug air contradicted any true sympathy. "You can use your pretty face and easy body as much as you want, but in the end, you're the one who'll get used. He may say he loves you now, but in the end, he'll get tired of you. Save yourself the grief. I'm doing you a favor."

"But he isn't saying he loves—" There was no point. The ironic thing here was that I was fairly certain Adrian did just want to use me for sex. I didn't have any delusions about that. But seeing as I wasn't actually sleeping with him, there was no problem—except, well, that Tatiana seemed to see of all this as a problem. I sighed, suspecting no argument was going to make her

believe that I wasn't interested in Adrian. "Look, if you're so certain we can't have a future together, then why are you telling me this? According to you, he's going to throw me away anyway. Your Majesty."

She hesitated for just a second, and I nearly laughed. Despite her trash-talking about me, my mom, and other dhampirs, some part of her really was worried that I might indeed be charming and pretty enough to seduce Adrian into a disgraceful marriage. She quickly hid her uncertainty.

"I like to take care of things before they become messy, that's all. Besides, it's going to make things easier for him and Vasilisa if they aren't dragging around baggage from you."

Whoa, whoa. My moment of brief satisfaction shattered—into confusion. I was as lost now as I'd been when she first started accusing me of being involved with Adrian.

"Him and . . . Vasilisa? Lissa? What are you talking about?" I forgot the *Your Majesty*, but I don't think she cared at this point.

"The two of them are an excellent match," she said, sounding like she was about ready to purchase some artwork. "Despite your bad influence, Vasilisa's grown into a very promising young woman. She has a very serious, very dedicated nature that will cure some of his recklessness. And being together would allow them to continue examining their . . . unusual magical situation."

Five minutes ago, me marrying Adrian had been the craziest thing I'd ever heard. It had just been trumped, however, by the thought of Lissa marrying Adrian.

"Lissa and Adrian. Together. You can't be serious. Your Majesty."

"If they're both here together, I think they'll come around to it. They already have a certain charisma around each other. Plus, both of Adrian's grandmothers came from branches of the Dragomir family. He has more than enough blood to help her carry on the Dragomir line."

"So does Christian Ozera." In one of their more disgustingly cute moments, Lissa and Christian had looked up his family tree to see if he had enough Dragomir genes to be able to pass on the name. When they found out he did, they'd then starting naming their future children. It had been horrible. I'd left after Lissa told me they'd name their third daughter after me.

"Christian Ozera?" That condescending smile of hers tightened. "There is no way Vasilisa Dragomir is going to marry him."

"Well, yeah. Not anytime soon. I mean, they're going to go to college and __"

"Not now, not ever," interrupted Tatiana. "The Dragomirs are an ancient and exalted line of royalty. Their last descendent is not going to attach herself to someone like him."

"He's royal," I said in a low voice that was on the verge of becoming my scary voice. For whatever reason, her insulting Christian made me angrier than her insulting me. "The Ozera line is every bit as important as the Dragomirs and Ivashkovs. He's royal, just like Lissa, like Adrian, and like you."

She snorted. "He is *not* like us. Yes, the Ozeras are one of the royal houses, and yes, he has several respectable distant cousins. But we aren't talking about them. We're talking about the son of someone who purposely became a Strigoi. Do you know how many times that's happened in my lifetime? Nine.

Nine in fifty years. And his parents were two of them."

"Yes—his *parents*," I said. "Not him."

"It doesn't matter. The Dragomir princess cannot associate with someone like him. That position is simply too prestigious."

"But your nephew is the perfect choice," I said bitterly. "Your Majesty."

"If you're such a smart girl, then you tell me—back at St. Vladimir's, how are they treated? How do your classmates view Christian? How do they view Christian and Vasilisa together?" Her eyes gleamed knowingly.

"Fine," I said. "They have lots of friends."

"And Christian is fully accepted?"

Immediately, I thought of Jesse and Ralf grilling me about Christian. And yes, there were plenty of people who still avoided Christian like he was already Strigoi. It was why he'd had no partner in culinary science. I tried to hide my thoughts, but my hesitation had given me away.

"You see?" she exclaimed. "And that's just a microcosm of society. Imagine it on a bigger scale. Imagine how it'll be when she's active in the government and trying to get others to support her. He'll be a liability. She'll make enemies just because of him. Do you really want that to happen to her?"

It was exactly what Christian had feared, and I denied it now as much as I had to him. "It won't happen. You're wrong."

"And you're very young, Miss Hathaway. You're also delaying your flight." She moved toward the door. The guardians across the room were by her side in the blink of an eye. "I have nothing more to say and hope this will be the last time we ever have a discussion like this." *Or any discussion*, I thought.

She left, and as soon as etiquette said I could go, I sprinted off to catch my plane. My head reeled as I went. How insane was that lady? Not only was she convinced that I was on the verge of eloping with Adrian, she also believed that she could work some kind of arranged marriage with him and Lissa. It was almost impossible to figure out which part of that conversation had been the most ridiculous.

I could hardly wait to tell the others what had happened and have a good laugh over it. But, as I returned to my room to get my bag, I reconsidered. There was already so much gossip about me and Adrian going around; I didn't think I should be fueling the fire. I also didn't think Christian should hear about this. He was already insecure about his position with Lissa. How would he feel if he found out the queen was already making plans to get rid of him?

So I decided to sit on the information for a while, which was hard because Lissa was practically waiting outside my door when I got back.

"Hey," I said. "I thought you'd be on the plane?"

"Nope. They delayed it by a few hours."

"Oh." Going home suddenly sounded like the best idea ever.

"What'd the queen want?" asked Lissa.

"To congratulate me," I said glibly. "Over my Strigoi kills. I didn't expect that from her—it was kind of weird."

"Not that weird," she said. "What you did was amazing. I'm sure she just wanted to recognize you for what you did."

"Yeah, I guess. So what's going on? What are we going to do with the extra time?" There was excitement in both her eyes and her feelings, and I

welcomed a change in subject.

"Well . . . I was thinking. Since we're at the Royal Court . . . don't you want to check it out? There's gotta be more to it than a bar and a coffee shop. Seems like we should know this stuff if we're going to be living here. Besides, we've got a lot to celebrate."

The full force of our situation hit me. I'd been so distracted by Victor that I hadn't even really let things sink in: We were at the Royal Court, the center of Moroi leadership. It was nearly as big as the Academy, and there had to be more to it than the all-business side we'd seen so far. Plus, she was right. We had a lot to be happy about. Victor had been put away. She'd gotten a sweet college deal. Only my alleged affair with Adrian had been a downside, but I was willing to put that aside as Lissa's contagious excitement seized me.

"Where's Christian?" I asked.

"Doing his own thing," she said. "You think we need him along?"

"Well, he usually *is* along lately."

"Yeah," she admitted, "but I'd kind of like just us to hang out." I sensed the thoughts behind her decision. Our brief conversation just before she'd gone to see the queen had made her nostalgic for the old days, back when it had just been the two of us on our own.

"No complaints here," I said. "How much can we cover in three hours?"

A mischievous grin lit her face. "The essentials." I could tell she had something special in mind, but she was trying to keep it in hidden. She couldn't block me out of the bond, but she had learned that if she didn't think too *hard* about certain things, then I wouldn't pick up on them easily. She liked being able to think that she could surprise me sometimes. Trying to hide big issues or problems from me never worked, though.

We set back out into the cold weather, with Lissa leading the way. She steered us away from the administrative buildings, off toward some others set at the farther end of the Court's grounds.

"The queen lives in that first building," Lissa explained. "It's not exactly a palace but the closest we have. Back when the Court was in Europe, Moroi royalty used to live in castles."

I made a face. "You make that sound like a good thing."

"Stone walls? Turrets? Even you have to admit that sounds pretty neat."

"Yeah, but I bet they had crap Internet access."

Lissa shook her head at me, smiling, and didn't dignify my comment with a response. We passed some other buildings that had the same ornate stonework as the others but were tall and built in a style that reminded me of apartments. She confirmed as much.

"Those are town houses, where people who live here year-round stay."

I eyed them, wondering what they were like on the inside, and a happy thought came to me. "You think that's where we'll live?"

The thought caught her off guard, but she soon grew just as excited as me. She, too, liked the idea of us having our own place, free to decorate it and come and go as we wanted. I rather liked the idea of Dimitri living with us too, but here at Court, he wouldn't be with her 24/7. For that matter, I actually wouldn't need to be with her 24/7 either. Would they let me live with her? Or would this be another chance to show I wasn't needed?

"I hope so," she said, oblivious to my worries. "Top floor with a view."

I mustered another smile. "And a pool."

"How can you think about a pool in this weather?"

"Hey, if we're fantasizing here, we might as well go the whole way. I bet Tatiana's got one. I bet she wears a bikini and has hot guys rubbing her down with suntan lotion."

I expected another eye roll, but Lissa just grinned as she led me into a building that was near the town houses. "Funny you mention that."

"What?" I exclaimed. She was about ready to burst with her secret. I was *this* close to pulling it out of her mind. I would have, too, if I hadn't been so stunned by our surroundings. It was sensory overload: delicate music, fountains, plants, people in white robes, everything gleaming and silver . . .

It was a spa, a full-fledged luxury spa hidden away in an old stone building here at Court. Who would have guessed? A long granite receptionist's desk guarded the entrance, so we only had a partial view, but what I could see was pretty sweet. Women sat along a wall getting pedicures and manicures. Moroi men and women were getting haircuts and color. What looked like a maze of halls could just be seen in the back of the salon, with a directory of arrows pointing to other sections: massage, sauna, facials, etc.

Lissa grinned at me. "What do you think?"

"I think Adrian was right about the Court having all sorts of secrets." I gave a mock sigh. "And I *hate* having to admit that he's right."

"You've been so down about the field experience and . . . other stuff." She didn't have to mention Mason's death and the Strigoi fight. I read it from her mind. "I figured you could use a treat. I checked their openings here while you were with the queen, and they were able to squeeze us in."

Lissa walked up to the receptionist and told her who we were. The woman immediately recognized our names but seemed surprised to be letting a dhampir in. I didn't care, though. I was too bedazzled by the sights and sounds around me. Compared to the harsh, practical lifestyle I usually led, this sort of luxury almost defied belief.

After checking in, Lissa turned to me, face eager and radiant. "I got us set up to get massages with these—"

"Nails," I interrupted.

"What?"

"I want my nails done. Can I get a manicure?"

It was the most exotic, completely useless thing I could imagine. Well, it wasn't useless for ordinary women. But for me? With the way I used my hands and subjected them to blisters, bruises, dirt, and wind? Yes. Useless. I hadn't painted my nails in ages. There was no reason. Half the nail polish would probably chip off after one practice session. A novice like me couldn't afford that kind of luxury. And that was why I so, so desperately wanted one. Seeing Lissa wear makeup had awakened that longing in me for some beautification of my own. I accepted that it could never be a regular part of my life, but if I was in a place like this today, then by God, I wanted my nails done.

Lissa faltered a little. She'd apparently had big plans for this massage thing. But, she had a hard time refusing me and spoke to the receptionist again. It sounded like the receptionist had to do a bit of juggling with her schedule, but

she said she could make it work.

"Of course, Princess." She smiled happily, entranced by Lissa's natural charisma. Half the time, Lissa didn't even need spirit to get people to help her.

"I don't want to be an inconvenience," Lissa said.

"No, no. Definitely not!"

We soon found ourselves sitting at adjacent tables while Moroi women soaked our hands in hot water and started scrubbing them with weird combinations of sugar and seaweed.

"Why the manicure?" Lissa wanted to know. I explained my reasoning to her, about how I hardly had time for makeup anymore and how the abuse my hands went through made any sort of pampering impractical. Her face turned thoughtful. "I never thought about that before. I just figured you weren't into it lately. Or, well, that you didn't need it. Not with your looks."

"Whatever," I said. "You're the one guys worship."

"Because of my name. You're the one that guys—like a certain one we know—actually want for other reasons."

Gee, I wondered who she could be referring to. "Yeah, but those other reasons aren't very noble."

She shrugged. "The point's the same. You don't need makeup for them to drool all over you."

Then I felt the weirdest thing through the bond. I saw myself through her eyes. It was like looking in a mirror, except she only had a profile view of me. But when she looked at me, she really did think I was beautiful. With my tan and dark brown hair, I seemed exotic to her. She felt pale and washed out compared to me, skinny next to my curves. It was surreal, considering how often I felt scruffy next to her luminous beauty. Her envy wasn't malicious; that wasn't in her nature. It was more wistful, an admiration of a look she could never have.

I wanted to reassure her but had a feeling she didn't want me knowing about her insecurities. Besides, my thoughts were interrupted when the woman doing my nails asked what color I wanted. I picked a color that looked like gold glitter. Gaudy, perhaps, but I actually thought it looked kind of cool, and it wasn't like it was going to last long anyway. Lissa picked pale pink, a color as refined and elegant as she was. Hers got painted a lot faster than mine, though, because my manicurist had to spend so long softening my hands and filing the nails. Lissa finished long before I did.

When we both had glamorous hands, we proudly held them up side by side. "You look gorgeous, darling," she declared, affecting a sophisticated air.

Laughing, we went off to the massage area. Lissa had originally scheduled us for extensive massages, but the manicure had cut into a chunk of that time. So we modified the full-body massage into a foot massage, which was just as well since we couldn't have put on robes or any other changes of clothes with our nails still wet. All we had to do was remove our shoes and roll up our pants. I sat down in a chair while my feet soaked in warm, bubbling water. Someone put something into the tub that smelled like violets, but I didn't pay much attention. I was too entranced by my hands. They were perfect. The manicurist had buffed and hydrated them to silky softness, and my nails had been transformed into gleaming gold ovals.

“Rose,” I heard Lissa say.

“Hmm?” The lady had also put a clear coat of nail polish over the gold. I wondered if that would give the nails a longer lease on life.

“Rose.”

Sensing that Lissa wanted my undivided attention, I finally looked up from my awesome hands. She was grinning from ear to ear. I could feel that excited news burning in her again, the secret she’d had while we’d been walking over here.

“What’s up?” I asked.

She nodded downward. “Rose, this is Ambrose.”

I glanced absentmindedly toward the masseuse at my feet. “Hey, Ambrose, how’s it—” I cut myself off before the words *holy crap* or *whoa* left my lips.

The guy massaging my feet couldn’t have been much older than me. He had curly black hair and muscles everywhere. I knew this for a fact because he was shirtless and offered us both a good view of his sculpted pecs and biceps. His deep golden skin was a color achievable only by excessive time in the sun, indicating he was human. The bite marks on his neck confirmed it. A pretty boy feeder. *Very* pretty.

His attractiveness was almost unreal, though. Dimitri was gorgeous, but he had little flaws that made him that much more gorgeous. Ambrose was too perfect, like a piece of art. I didn’t want to throw myself into his arms or anything, but he was certainly nice to look at.

Lissa, still worried about my love life, had apparently thought this was exactly what I needed. Her masseuse was female.

“It’s very nice to meet you, Rose,” said Ambrose. He had a musical voice.

“It’s nice to meet you too,” I said, suddenly self-conscious as he lifted my feet out of the water and toweled them off. I was especially self-conscious of the appearance of my feet. They weren’t gross or anything, since they weren’t usually exposed to the elements like my hands. I just kind of wished they’d been polished up too if this male model was going to handle them so much.

Lissa, astute enough to sense me being flustered, could barely stop from laughing. I heard her thoughts in my head: *Cute, huh?* I cut her a look, refusing to voice my thoughts out loud. *He’s Tatiana’s personal masseuse. That practically makes you royalty*. I sighed loudly to let her know she wasn’t as funny as she thought she was. *And when I say personal, I mean* personal.

I jerked in surprise, accidentally kicking one of my feet out. Ambrose’s deft hands caught it before I hit him in his pretty face, thankfully. I might not have been able to communicate telepathically, but I was pretty sure there could be no question to Lissa that the look on my face said, *You can’t be serious because if you are, you’re in big trouble*.

Her grin widened. *I thought you’d like that. Pampered by the queen’s secret lover.*

Pampered wasn’t exactly the word that came to mind. Looking at Ambrose’s young, beautiful features, I just couldn’t picture him getting it on with that old hag. Of course, that denial might have just been my brain’s way of refusing to acknowledge that someone who had touched her was now touching me. Ew.

Ambrose’s hands were checking out my calves along with my feet, and he struck up a conversation about what elegant legs I had. His dazzling white

smile never left his face, but most of my answers were curt. I still couldn't get over the thought of him and Tatiana together.

Silently, Lissa groaned. *He's flirting with you, Rose!* she thought to me. *What are you doing? You can do better than that. I went to all this trouble to get you the hottest guy here, and this is what I get!*

This one-sided-conversation thing was becoming a pain in the ass. I wanted to tell her that I'd never asked for her to rent out this guy for me. In fact, I suddenly had images of the queen calling me in for another meeting to yell at me for having a nonexistent affair with Ambrose too. Wouldn't that be perfect?

Ambrose continued smiling as he rubbed the soles of one foot with his thumbs. It hurt—but in a good way. I hadn't realized how sore that spot was. "They go to such trouble to make sure you wear the right black and white clothes, but no one ever thinks about your feet," he mused. "How are you supposed to stand around all day *and* still manage roundhouse kicks and cat stances in bad shoes?"

I was about to tell them that he really didn't need to keep worrying about my feet, but something odd suddenly struck me. "Roundhouse kicks" and "cat stances" weren't top-secret guardian terms. Anyone could Google "martial arts" and find out about those kinds of things. Still, it wasn't the kind of topic I'd expect a Moroi to casually throw around, let alone a feeder. I studied Ambrose closer, noting the way his dark eyes so carefully darted around and observed everything. I recalled his fast reflexes in stopping my kick.

I felt my jaw start to drop, and I shut it before I looked like an idiot.

"You're a dhampir," I breathed.

SIXTEEN

"SO, ARE YOU," HE TEASED.

"Yeah, but I just thought—"

"That I was human? Because of the bite marks?"

"Yeah," I admitted. No point in lying.

"We all have to survive," he said. "And dhampirs are good at figuring out ways to."

"Yeah, but most of us become guardians," I pointed out. "Especially men." I still couldn't believe he was a dhampir—or that I hadn't spotted it right away.

Long ago, dhampirs had been born from humans and Moroi getting together. We were half-vampire, half-human. Over time, Moroi started keeping themselves separate from humans. Humans grew too plentiful and no longer needed Moroi for magic. Moroi now feared they'd become human experiments if ever discovered. So no more dhampirs were being made that way, and in a bizarre genetic twist, dhampirs getting together with dhampirs couldn't make more dhampirs.

The only way my race kept reproducing was through Moroi mixing with dhampirs. Normal logic would make you think that a dhampir and a Moroi would make children who were ¾ Moroi. Nope. We came out with perfect dhampir genes, half and half, mixing some of the best traits of both races. Most dhampirs came from dhampir women and Moroi men. For centuries, these women had sent their kids off to be raised somewhere else, so that the mothers could go back to being guardians. That's what mine had done.

Over time, though, some dhampir women had decided they wanted to raise their children themselves. They refused to be guardians and instead banded together in communities. That's what Dimitri's mother had done. Lots of ugly rumors surrounded these women because Moroi men often visited in the hopes

of getting cheap sex. Dimitri had told me that a lot of these stories were exaggerated and that most dhampir women weren't that easy. The rumors came from the fact that these women were almost always single mothers who had no contact with their kids' fathers—and because some dhampirs would let Moroi drink blood during sex. It was a kinky, dirty thing in our culture and was where the nickname for these non-guardian dhampirs had come from: blood whores.

But I'd never even thought about a *male* blood whore.

My mind was reeling. "Most guys who don't want to be guardians just run off," I said. It was rare, but it happened. Guys bailed on guardian school and disappeared to hide out among humans. It was another disgraceful thing.

"I didn't want to run off," said Ambrose, seeming very cheerful about all this. "But I didn't want to fight Strigoi either. So I did this."

Beside me, Lissa was stunned. Blood whores stayed on the fringes of our world. Having one right in front of her—a guy, no less—was incredible.

"This is better than being a guardian?" I asked in disbelief.

"Well, let's see. Guardians spend all their time watching out for others, risking their lives, and wearing bad shoes. Me? I have great shoes, am currently massaging a pretty girl, and sleep in an awesome bed."

I made a face. "Let's not talk about where you sleep, okay?"

"And giving blood isn't as bad as you think. I don't give as much as a feeder, but the high's pretty neat."

"Let's not talk about that either," I said. No way would I admit that I knew Moroi bites were indeed "pretty neat."

"Fine. But say what you want, my life's good." He gave me a lopsided smile.

"But aren't people, like . . . well, aren't they mean to you? They must say things. . . ."

"Oh yes," he agreed. "Horrible things. I get called a lot of ugly names. But you know where I get the most grief from? Other dhampirs. Moroi tend to leave me alone."

"That's because they don't understand what it's like to be a guardian, how important it is." It occurred to me, with some unease, that I sounded exactly like my mother. "It's what dhampirs are meant to do."

Ambrose rose, unkinking his legs and giving me a face full of muscled chest. "You sure? How would you like to find out what you're really meant to do? I know someone who might be able to tell you."

"Ambrose, don't do it," groaned Lissa's manicurist. "That woman's crazy."

"She's psychic, Eve."

"She's not psychic, and you *cannot* take the Dragomir princess to go see her."

"The queen herself goes to her for advice," he argued back.

"That's a mistake too," grumbled Eve.

Lissa and I exchanged looks. She'd latched onto the word *psychic*. Psychics and fortune-tellers were generally regarded with the same disbelief as ghosts —except that Lissa and I had recently learned that psychic abilities we'd previously believed to be fantasy were actually part of spirit. Hope that she might have stumbled onto another spirit user shot through Lissa.

"We'd love to see a psychic. Can we go? Please?" Lissa glanced at a nearby

clock. “And soon? We have a flight to catch.”

Eve clearly thought it was a waste of our time, but Ambrose could hardly wait to show us. We put our shoes back on and were led out of the massage area. The spa rooms had been in a maze of halls behind the front salon, and we soon found ourselves in another maze that was farther back still.

“There’s no directory here,” I said as we walked past closed doors. “What are these rooms for?”

“Everything and anything people will pay money for,” he said.

“Like what?”

“Ah, Rose. You’re such an innocent.”

We finally reached a door at the end of the hall. We stepped inside and found a small room that only held a desk. A closed door sat beyond it. A Moroi at the desk looked up, obviously recognizing Ambrose. He walked over to her, and the two got into a quiet argument as he tried to get her to let us in.

Lissa turned to me, keeping her voice soft. “What do you think?”

My eyes were on Ambrose. “That all that muscle’s going to waste.”

“Forget the blood whore thing already. I mean about this psychic. Do you think we’ve found another spirit user?” she asked eagerly.

“If a party boy like Adrian can be a spirit user, then a woman who tells the future probably can be too.”

Ambrose returned to us, grinning. “Suzanne was happy to fit you into the schedule before your flight. It’ll be just a minute while Rhonda finishes up with her current client.”

Suzanne didn’t look very happy about fitting us in, but I didn’t have time to ponder that because the inner door opened and an older Moroi man walked out, entranced. He gave Suzanne some cash, nodded at the rest of us, and left. Ambrose stood and made a wide sweeping motion toward the door.

“Your turn.”

Lissa and I walked inside the other room. Ambrose followed and closed the door behind us. It was like walking into someone’s heart. Everything was red. Plush red carpet, a red velvet couch, velvet brocade wallpaper, and red satin cushions on the floor. Sitting on the cushions was a Moroi in her forties, with curly black hair and equally dark eyes. There was a very faint olive cast to her skin, but her overall look was pale, like all Moroi. Her black clothing stood out in stark contrast to the red room, and jewelry the color of my nails gleamed on her neck and hands. I expected her to speak in a spooky, mysterious voice—one with an exotic accent—but her words sounded blandly American.

“Please, sit down.” She pointed to some cushions across from her. Ambrose sat on the couch. “Who’ve you brought?” she asked him as Lissa and I settled down.

“Princess Vasilisa Dragomir, and her guardian-to-be, Rose. They need a fast fortune.”

“Why do you always want to rush these things?” Rhonda asked.

“Hey, it’s not me. They have a plane to catch.”

“It’d be the same if you didn’t. You’re always in a rush.”

I shook off my awe of the room enough to pay attention to their easy banter and similar hair. “Are you guys related?”

“This is my aunt,” said Ambrose fondly. “She adores me.” Rhonda rolled her

eyes.

That was a surprise. Dhampirs rarely had contact with their extended Moroi family, but then, Ambrose was hardly normal. Lissa was intrigued by all of this too, but her interest was different from mine. She was studying Rhonda intently, trying to find any indication that the woman might be a spirit user.

"Are you a gypsy?" I asked.

Rhonda made a face and began shuffling some cards. "I'm Roma," she said. "A lot of people call us gypsies, though the term isn't exactly accurate. And really, I'm Moroi first." She gave the cards a few more shuffles, then handed them to Lissa. "Cut, please."

Lissa was still staring, half-hoping she might see an aura. Adrian could sense other spirit users, but she didn't have that skill yet. She cut the cards and handed them back. Rhonda put the deck back together and dealt out three cards to Lissa.

I leaned forward. "Cool." They were tarot cards. I didn't know much about them, only that they supposedly had mystical powers and could tell the future. I didn't believe in that stuff much more than I'd ever believed in religion, but then, until recently, I'd never really believed in ghosts, either.

The three cards were the Moon, the Empress, and the Ace of Cups. Ambrose leaned over my shoulder to peer at the cards. "Ooh," he said. "Very interesting."

Rhonda glanced up at him. "Hush. You don't know what you're talking about." She turned back to the cards and tapped the Ace of Cups. "You're on the verge of a new beginning, a rebirth of great power and emotion. Your life will change, but it will be a change that takes you in a direction that, while difficult, will ultimately illuminate the world."

"Whoa," I said.

Rhonda then pointed to the Empress. "Power and leadership lie ahead of you, which you will handle with grace and intelligence. The seeds are already in place, though there's an edge of uncertainty—an enigmatic set of influences that hang around you like mist." Her attention was on the Moon as she said those words. "But my overall impression is that those unknown factors won't deter you from your destiny."

Lissa's eyes were wide. "You can tell that just from the cards?"

Rhonda shrugged. "It's in the cards, yes, but I also have a gift that lets me see forces beyond what ordinary people can perceive."

She shuffled the cards again and then handed them to me to cut. I did, and she flipped three more over. The Nine of Swords, the Sun, and the Ace of Swords. The Sun card was upside down.

Now, I knew nothing about this stuff, but I immediately got the feeling I was about to get a raw deal compared to Lissa. The Empress card had shown a woman in a long dress, with stars on her head. The Moon had shown a full moon with two dogs below it, and the Ace of Cups had shown a bejeweled chalice filled with flowers.

Meanwhile, my Nine of Swords showed a woman sobbing in front of a wall of swords, and the Ace of Swords was a boring hand holding a plain iron sword. The Sun at least looked cheerful. It had what looked like an angel riding a white horse, with a brilliant sun shining above.

“Shouldn’t that be flipped right-side up?” I asked.

“No,” she said, eyes on the cards. After several moments of heavy silence, she said, “You will destroy that which is undead.”

I waited about thirty seconds for her to continue, but she didn’t. “Wait, that’s it?”

She nodded. “That’s what the cards say to me.”

I pointed at them. “Seems like they’ve got a little bit more to say than that. You gave Lissa a whole encyclopedia worth of information! And I already know I’m going to kill the undead. That’s my job.” Bad enough I’d gotten a minuscule fortune. It was also totally unoriginal.

Rhonda shrugged, as though that were some sort of explanation.

I started to say that she’d better not even think about charging me for that crap reading when there was a soft knock at the door. It opened, and to my surprise, Dimitri stuck his head inside. His eyes fell on Lissa and me. “Ah, they said you were in here.” He walked in and noticed Rhonda. To my further surprise, he gave her a low nod of respect and said very politely, “I’m sorry to interrupt, but I need to bring these two to their flight.”

Rhonda examined him—but not in a checking-him-out kind of way. It was more like he was mystery she wanted to figure out. “There’s nothing to apologize for. But maybe you’ve got time for a reading of your own?”

With our similar views on religion, I expected Dimitri to tell her he had no time for her scam-artist fortune-telling. Yet the look on his face stayed serious, and he finally nodded, sitting down beside me, letting me smell the sweet scent of leather and aftershave. “Thank you.” His words were still perfectly polite.

“I’ll be brief.” Rhonda was already shuffling up my useless cards. In record time, she had them ready for cutting and had dealt out three cards in front of Dimitri. The Knight of Rods, the Wheel of Fortune, and the Five of Cups. I couldn’t get a feel for these. The Knight of Rods was what it sounded like, a man on horseback with a long wooden spear. The Wheel of Fortune was a circle with strange symbols floating in the clouds. The Five of Cups showed five knocked-over cups spilling some kind of liquid out while a man stood with his back to them.

Her eyes flicked over the cards, looked at Dimitri, then looked back at the cards. Her expression was blank. “You will lose what you value most, so treasure it while you can.” She pointed to the Wheel of Fortune card. “The wheel is turning, always turning.”

The reading wasn’t as good as Lissa’s, but he’d gotten a hell of a lot more than me. Lissa elbowed me in a silent warning to be quiet, which startled me at first. Without even realizing it, I’d opened my mouth to protest. I shut it and glowered.

Dimitri’s face was dark and thoughtful as he stared at the cards. I didn’t know if he knew anything about this stuff, but he was staring at the images as though they really held all the secrets of the world. At last, he gave Rhonda another respectful nod. “Thank you.”

She nodded back, and then the three of us rose to catch our flight. Ambrose told us the readings were on him and that he’d settle up with Suzanne afterward. “It was worth it,” he told me. “Worth it to see you think twice

about your fate."

I scoffed. "No offense, but those cards didn't make me think much about anything." Like everything else, this just made him laugh.

We were about to leave Suzanne's little waiting room when Lissa suddenly dashed back to Rhonda's open doorway. I followed after her.

"Um, excuse me," Lissa said.

Rhonda looked up from more shuffling, her face troubled. "Yes?"

"This is going to sound weird, but . . . um, could you tell me what element you specialized in?"

I could feel Lissa holding her breath. She so, so wanted Rhonda to say she *hadn't* specialized, which was often the sign of having spirit. There was still so much to learn, and Lissa loved the ideas of finding others who could teach her —and she especially loved the idea of someone teaching her to foretell the future.

"Air," said Rhonda. A soft breezed rustled through our hair to prove the point. "Why?"

Lissa let go of her breath, disappointment washing over me through her link. "No reason. Thank you again."

SEVENTEEN

OUT ON THE RUNWAY, Christian stood near the entrance to the plane, along with a few of the other guardians. Lissa ran off to talk to him, leaving me and Dimitri alone. He hadn't said a word the entire way back from the spa. Strong and silent were typical behaviors for him, but something about his mood struck me as unusual this time.

"Are you still thinking about what Rhonda said? That woman's a total scam."

"Why do you say that?" he asked, stopping not far from where the others stood. A sharp wind blasted us all in the face, and I hoped we could board soon.

"Because she didn't tell us anything! You should have heard my future. It was, like, one sentence stating the obvious. Lissa had a better fortune," I admitted, "but it wasn't really anything that profound. Rhonda said she'd be a great leader. I mean, seriously, how hard is that to figure out?"

Dimitri smiled at me. "Would you be a believer if she'd given you a more interesting reading?"

"Maybe if it was good." When he just laughed, I asked, "But you're taking it seriously. Why? You really believe in that kind of stuff?"

"It's not so much that I believe . . . or that I don't believe." He wore a black knit cap over his head today and tugged it down to better cover his ears. "I just respect people like her. They have access to knowledge other people don't."

"She's not a spirit user, though, so I'm not really sure where she's getting this knowledge. I still think she's a con artist."

"She's a *vrăjitoare,* actually."

"A . . ." I wasn't even going to touch that one. "A what? Is that Russian?"

"Romanian. It means . . . well, there's no real translation. 'Witch' is close, but that's not right. Their idea of a witch isn't the same as an American's."

I had *never* expected to have a conversation like this with him. I just didn't think of Dimitri as the superstitious type. For half a moment, I thought that if he could believe in something like witches and fortune-tellers, maybe he could handle me seeing ghosts. I considered saying something to him but promptly decided against it. I wouldn't have had a chance to say anything anyway because Dimitri kept talking.

"My grandmother was like Rhonda," he explained. "That is, she practiced the same kind of arts. Personality-wise, they're very different."

"Your grandmother was a . . . v-whatever?"

"It's called something else in Russian, but yes, same meaning. She used to read cards and give advice too. It was how she made her living."

I bit off any comments about frauds. "Was she right? In her predictions?"

"Sometimes. Don't look at me like that."

"Like what?"

"You've got this look on your face that says you think I'm delusional, but you're too nice to say anything."

"Delusional's kind of harsh. I'm just surprised, that's all. I never expected you to buy into this stuff."

"Well, I grew up with it, so it doesn't seem that strange to me. And like I said, I'm not sure I buy into it 100 percent."

Adrian had joined the group by the plane and was protesting loudly about us not being able to board yet.

"I never thought of you as having a grandmother, either," I told Dimitri. "I mean, obviously, you'd have to. But still . . . it's just weird to think about growing up with one." Contact with my own mother was rare enough, and I'd never even met any of my other family members. "Was it weird having a witch grandma? Scary? Was she always, like, threatening to cast spells if you were bad?"

"Most of the time she just threatened to send me to my room."

"That doesn't sound so scary to me."

"That's because you haven't met her."

I noted the wording. "Is she still alive?"

He nodded. "Yeah. It'll take more than old age to kill her off. She's tough. She was actually a guardian for a while."

"Really?" Much like with Ambrose, my fixed ideas about dhampirs, guardians, and blood whores were getting muddled. "So she gave it up to become a—uh, to stay with her kids?"

"She has very strong ideas about family—ideas that probably sound kind of sexist to you. She believes all dhampirs should train and put in time as guardians, but that the women should eventually return home to raise their children together."

"But not the men?"

"No," he said wryly. "She thinks men still need to stay out there and kill Strigoi."

"Wow." I remembered Dimitri telling me a little about his family. His father had popped back every so often, but that was about it for the men in his life.

All of his siblings were sisters. And honestly, the idea didn't sound so sexist. I had the same ideas about men going off to fight, which was why meeting Ambrose had been so weird. "You were the one who had to go. The women in your family kicked you out."

"Hardly," he laughed. "My mother would take me back in a second if I wanted to come home." He was smiling like it was a joke, but I saw something in his eyes that looked a lot like homesickness. It was gone in a flash, though, as Dimitri turned around when Adrian started whooping about how we could finally board.

When we were settled on the plane, Lissa could hardly wait to tell our friends about the news. She started off with how I'd been called in to see the queen. That wasn't a topic I'd wanted discussed, but she pushed forward, excited that the queen had wanted to "praise" me. Everyone seemed impressed except Adrian. The look on his face told me that he was sure that she most definitely hadn't called me in for that. However, there was enough of a puzzled look in his eyes to make me think he had no clue about the real reason. It was about time I knew something he didn't. I had a feeling he would have been as shocked by the idea of him hooking up with Lissa as I'd been.

Lissa then told them about the offer to live at Court and go to college at Lehigh. "I still can't believe it," she mused. "It sounds too good to be true."

Adrian knocked back a glass of what looked like whiskey. How had he gotten a hold of that so soon? "Coming from my great-aunt? It *is* too good to be true."

"What do you mean?" I asked. After being accused of being engaged in a fictitious romance by Tatiana and finding out she had a dhampir lover/feeder, nothing about her would surprise me anymore. "Is Lissa in trouble?"

"What, bodily? Nah. It's just, my great-aunt doesn't do things out of the kindness of her heart. Well," Adrian amended, "sometimes she does. She's not a total bitch. And I think she means it about worrying about the Dragomirs. I've heard she liked your parents. But as to why she's doing this . . . I don't know. You've got radical ideas. Maybe she does want to hear different opinions. Or maybe she wants to keep an eye on you, keep you from causing trouble." *Or maybe she wants to marry Lissa off to you*, I silently added.

Christian didn't like any of this. "He's right. They could be trying to rein you in. You should go live with Aunt Tasha. You don't have to go to a Moroi school."

"But she'll be safer if she does," I admitted.

I was all for fighting the system—and keeping Lissa away from royal plans—but if she went to a college that wasn't one the Moroi protected, she'd be in danger, and I certainly didn't want that either. I started to add more, but just then, the plane took off. As soon as it was up in the air, my headache from yesterday returned. It was like all the air around us pressing on my skull.

"Son of a bitch," I groaned, putting my hand on my forehead.

"You're sick again?" asked Lissa, worried. I nodded.

"Have you always had trouble flying?" asked Adrian, gesturing for someone to refill his drink.

"Never," I said. "Damn it. I don't want to go through this again."

I gritted my teeth and tried to ignore the pain, as well as those black shapes

again. It took some effort, but if I focused hard enough, I actually got it all to lessen a little. Weird. Still, I didn't want to talk much after that, and everyone left me alone. The college conversation dropped off.

Hours passed. It was almost time to arrive back at the Academy. One of the Moroi flight attendants walked down the aisle to our group, a frown on her face. Alberta instantly snapped to attention. "What's wrong?"

"An ice storm just blew through the area," the flight attendant said. "We can't land at St. Vladimir's because the runway isn't accessible with the ice and the winds. We need fuel, however, so we're going to land at Martinville Regional. It's a small airport a few hours away by car, but they weren't as affected as much. Our plan is to land there, refuel, and then fly into the Academy once they've cleared the runway. It's less than an hour by air."

It was annoying news, but it didn't sound too bad. Besides, what could we do? At the very least, I'd get some relief soon. If my headache behaved like before, it'd go away when we were on the ground. We settled back into our seats and put on our belts, readying for the landing. The weather looked miserable outside, but the pilot was good and landed with no difficulties.

And that's when it happened.

As soon as we touched the ground, my world exploded. The headache didn't go away; it got worse. Much worse—and I hadn't thought that was possible. It felt like my entire skull was being ripped open.

But that was just the beginning. Because suddenly, all around me, were faces. Ghostly, translucent faces and bodies—just like Mason's. And oh God, they were everywhere. I couldn't even see the seats or my friends. Just those faces—and their hands. Pale, shining hands reached out for me. Mouths opened like they would speak, and all of those faces looked as though they wanted something from me.

And the more they came at me, the more of them I started to recognize. I saw Victor's guardians, the ones who had been killed when we'd rescued Lissa. Their eyes were wide and terrified—over what? Were they reliving their deaths? Mixed in with them were children I didn't recognize right away. Then—I knew. They were the ones Dimitri and I had found dead after a Strigoi massacre. These children had the same washed-out look Mason had, but their necks were covered in blood, just as they'd been at the house. Its scarlet hue stood out in stark contrast to their shadowy, luminescent bodies.

Thicker and thicker the faces grew. While none of them actually spoke, there seemed to be a buzzing in my ears that grew louder as more and more of them came. Three new figures joined the crowd. They should have blended into the rest, but they stood out almost as sharply as the blood on the children's necks had.

It was Lissa's family.

Her mother, her father, and her brother Andre. They looked exactly as they had the last time I'd seen them, just before the car accident. Blond. Beautiful. Regal. Like Mason, they wore no marks of their deaths, even though I knew the crash had done horrible things to them. And like Mason, they just stared at me with sad eyes, not speaking but clearly wanting to say something. Only, unlike with Mason, I understood the message.

There was a large patch of blackness behind Andre that was steadily growing bigger. He pointed at me, and then he pointed at it. I knew, without understanding how I knew, that it was the entrance to the world of death, the world I had come back from. Andre—who'd been my age when he died—pointed again. His parents joined him. They didn't have to speak for me to know what they were saying: *You shouldn't have lived. You need to come back with us. . . .*

I started screaming. And screaming.

I thought someone on the plane was talking to me, but I couldn't be sure, not when I couldn't see anything but those faces, hands, and the blackness behind Andre. Every so often, Mason's face materialized nearby, solemn and sad. I appealed to him for help.

"Make them go away!" I yelled. "Make them go away!"

But there was nothing he would—or could—do. Frantically, I undid my seat belt and tried to stand up. The ghosts didn't touch me, but they were all too close, still reaching and pointing with skeletal hands. I waved my arms to fend them off, screaming for someone to help me and make this all stop.

There was no help for me, though. No help for all those hands and hollow eyes or the pain that consumed me. It grew so bad that glittering black spots began to dance across my field of vision. I had a feeling I was going to pass out, and I welcomed that. It would make the pain go away and save me from the faces. The spots grew bigger and bigger, and soon I could no longer see anything. The faces disappeared, and so did the pain as sweet black waters dragged me under.

EIGHTEEN

EVERYTHING BECAME FUZZY after that. I had vague impressions of moving in and out of consciousness, of people saying my name, and of being in the air again. Eventually, I woke up in the school's infirmary and found Dr. Olendzki looking down at me.

"Hello, Rose," she said. She was a middle-aged Moroi and often joked that I was her number one patient. "How are you feeling?"

The details of what had happened came back. The faces. Mason. The other ghosts. The terrible pain in my head. All of it was gone.

"Fine," I said, half-surprised to be saying those words. For a moment, I wondered if maybe it had all been a dream. Then I looked beyond her and saw Dimitri and Alberta looming nearby. The looks on their faces told me the events on the plane had indeed been real.

Alberta cleared her throat, and Dr. Olendzki glanced back. "May we?" Alberta asked. The doctor nodded, and the other two stepped forward.

Dimitri, as always, was a balm to me. No matter what happened, I always felt a little safer in his presence. Yet even he hadn't been able to stop what had happened at the airport. When he looked at me like he was now, with an expression of such tenderness and concern, it triggered mixed feelings. Part of me loved that he cared so much. The other part wanted to be strong for him and didn't want to make him worry.

"Rose . . ." began Alberta uncertainly. I could tell she had no clue how to go about this. What had happened was beyond her realm of experience. Dimitri took over.

"Rose, what happened back there?" Before I could utter a word, he cut me off. "And do *not* say it was nothing this time."

Well, if I couldn't fall back on that answer, then I didn't know what to say.

Dr. Olendzki pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose. “We only want to help you.”

“I don’t need any help,” I said. “I’m fine.” I sounded just like Brandon and Brett. I was probably only one step away from saying, “I fell.”

Alberta finally regained herself. “You were fine when we were in the air. When we landed, you were most definitely not fine.”

“I’m fine now,” I replied stonily, not meeting their eyes.

“What happened then?” she asked. “Why the screaming? What did you mean when you said we needed to make ‘them’ go away?”

I briefly considered my other fallback answer, the one about stress. That sounded completely stupid now. So, again, I said nothing. To my surprise, I felt tears build up in my eyes.

“Rose,” murmured Dimitri, voice as soft as silk against my skin. “Please.”

Something in that cracked me. It was so hard for me to stand against him. I turned my head and stared at the ceiling.

“Ghosts,” I whispered. “I saw ghosts.”

None of them had expected that, but honestly, how could they have? Heavy silence fell. Finally, Dr. Olendzki spoke in a faltering voice.

“W-what do you mean?”

I swallowed. “He’s been following me for the last couple of weeks. Mason. On campus. I know it sounds crazy—but it’s him. Or his ghost. That’s what happened with Stan. I locked up because Mason was there, and I didn’t know what to do. On the plane . . . I think he was there too . . . and others. But I couldn’t exactly see them when we were in the air. Just glimpses . . . and the headache. But when we landed in Martinville, he was there in full form. And —and he wasn’t alone. There were others with him. Other ghosts.” A tear escaped from my eye, and I hastily wiped at it, hoping none of them had seen it.

I waited then, not sure what to expect. Would someone laugh? Tell me I was crazy? Accuse me of lying and demand to know what had *really* happened?

“Did you know them?” Dimitri asked finally.

I turned back and actually met his eyes. They were still serious and concerned, no mockery. “Yeah . . . I saw some of Victor’s guardians and the people from the massacre. Lissa’s . . . Lissa’s family was there too.”

Nobody said anything after that. They all just sort of exchanged glances, hoping perhaps that one of the others might shed light on all this.

Dr. Olendzki sighed. “Could I speak with the two of you privately?”

The three of them stepped out of the examining room, shutting the door behind them. Only it didn’t quite catch. Scrambling off the bed, I crossed the room and stood by the door. The tiny crack was just enough for my dhampir hearing to pick up the conversation. I felt bad about eavesdropping, but they were talking about me, and I couldn’t shake the feeling that my future was on the line here.

“—obvious what’s going on,” hissed Dr. Olendzki. It was the first time I’d ever heard her sound so irate. With patients, she was the picture of serenity. It was hard to imagine her angry, but she was clearly pissed off now. “That poor girl. She’s undergoing post-traumatic stress disorder, and it’s no wonder after everything that’s happened.”

“Are you sure?” asked Alberta. “Maybe it’s something else. . . .” But as her words trailed off, I could tell she didn’t really know of anything else that would explain it.

“Look at the facts: a teenage girl who witnessed one of her friends getting killed and then had to kill his killer. You don’t think that’s traumatic? You don’t think that might have had the *tiniest* effect on her?”

“Tragedy is something all guardians have to deal with,” said Alberta.

“Maybe there’s not much to be done for guardians in the field, but Rose is still a student here. There are resources that can help her.”

“Like what?” asked Dimitri. He sounded curious and concerned, not like he was challenging her.

“Counseling. Talking to someone about what happened can do worlds of good. You should have done that as soon as she got back. You should do it for the others who were with her while you’re at it. Why doesn’t anyone think of these things?”

“It’s a good idea,” said Dimitri. I recognized the tone in his voice—his mind was spinning. “She could do it on her day off.”

“Day off? More like every day. You should pull her from this entire field experience. Fake Strigoi attacks are not the way to recover from a real one.”

“No!” I had pushed open the door before I realized it. They all stared at me, and I immediately felt stupid. I’d just busted myself for spying.

“Rose,” said Dr. Olendzki, returning to her caring (but slightly chastising) doctor mode. “You should go lie down.”

“I’m fine. And you can’t make me quit the field experience. I won’t graduate if you do.”

“You aren’t well, Rose, and there’s nothing to be ashamed of after what’s happened to you. Thinking you’re seeing the ghost of someone who died isn’t too out there when you consider the circumstances.”

I started to correct her on the *thinking you’re seeing* part but then bit it off. Arguing that I’d really seen a ghost wasn’t probably going to do me any favors, I decided, even if I was starting to believe that was exactly what I was seeing. Frantically, I tried to think of a convincing reason to stay in the field experience. I was usually pretty good at talking myself out of bad situations.

“Unless you’re going to put me in counseling 24/7, you’re just going to make it worse. I *need* something to do. Most of my classes are on hold right now. What would I do? Sit around? Think more and more about what happened? I’ll go crazy—for real. I don’t want to sit on the past forever. I need to get moving with my future.”

This threw them into an argument about what to do with me. I listened, biting my tongue, knowing I needed to stay out of it. Finally, with some grumbling from the doctor, they all decided I would go on half-time for the field experience.

It proved to be the ideal compromise for everyone—well, except me. I just wanted life to go on exactly as it had. Still, I knew this was probably as good a deal as I’d get. They decided that I’d do three days of field experience a week, with no night duties. During the other days, I’d have to do some training and whatever bookwork they dug up for me.

I’d also have to see a counselor, which I wasn’t thrilled about. It wasn’t that

I had anything against counselors. Lissa had been seeing one, and it had been really useful for her. Talking things out helped. It was just . . . well, this was just something I didn't want to talk about.

But if it came down to this or being kicked out of the field experience, I was more than happy to go with this. Alberta felt they could still justify passing me on half-time. She also liked the idea of having counseling going on at the same time I was dealing with fake Strigoi attacks—just in case they really were traumatizing.

After a bit more examination, Dr. Olendzki gave me a clean bill of health and told me I could go back to my dorm. Alberta left after that, but Dimitri stuck around to walk me back.

"Thanks for thinking of the half-time thing," I told him. The walkways were wet today because the weather had warmed up after the storm. It wasn't bathing suit weather or anything, but a lot of the ice and snow were melting. Water dripped steadily from trees, and we had to sidestep puddles.

Dimitri came to an abrupt stop and turned so that he stood right in front of me, blocking my path. I skidded to a halt, nearly running into him. He reached out and grabbed my arm, pulling me closer to him than I would have expected him to do in public. His fingers bit deep into me, but they didn't hurt.

"Rose," he said, the pain in his voice making my heart stop, "this shouldn't have been the first time I heard about this! Why didn't you tell me? Do you know what it was like? Do you know it was like for me to see you like that and not know what was happening? Do you know how scared I was?"

I was stunned, both from his outburst and our proximity. I swallowed, unable to speak at first. There was so much on his face, so many emotions. I couldn't recall the last time I'd seen that much of him on display. It was wonderful and frightening at the same time. I then said the stupidest thing possible.

"You're not scared of anything."

"I'm scared of lots of things. I was scared for you." He released me, and I stepped back. There was still passion and worry written all over him. "I'm not perfect. I'm not invulnerable."

"I know, it's just . . ." I didn't know what to say. He was right. I always saw Dimitri as larger than life. All-knowing. Invincible. It was hard for me to believe that he could worry about me so much.

"And this has been going on for a long time too," he added. "It was going on with Stan, when you were talking to Father Andrew about ghosts—you were dealing with it this whole time! Why didn't you tell anyone? Why didn't you tell Lissa . . . or . . . me?"

I stared into those dark, dark eyes, those eyes I loved. "Would you have believed me?"

He frowned. "Believed what?"

"That I'm seeing ghosts."

"Well . . . they aren't ghosts, Rose. You only think they are because—"

"That's why," I interrupted. "That's why I couldn't tell you or anybody. Nobody would believe me, not without thinking I'm crazy."

"I don't think you're crazy," he said. "But I think you've been through a lot." Adrian had said almost the exact same thing when I asked him how I could

tell if I was crazy or not.

"It's more than that," I said. I started walking again.

Without even taking another step, he reached out and grabbed me once more. He pulled me back to him, so that we now stood even closer than before. I glanced uneasily around again, wondering if someone might see us, but the campus was deserted. It was early, not quite sunset, so early that most people probably weren't even up for the school day yet. We wouldn't see activity around here for at least another hour. Still, I was surprised to see Dimitri was still risking it.

"Tell me then," he said. "Tell me how it's more than that."

"You won't believe me," I said. "Don't you get it? No one will. Even you . . . of all people." Something in that thought made my voice catch. Dimitri understood so much about me. I wanted—*needed*—him to understand this too.

"I'll . . . try. But I still don't think you really understand what's happening to you."

"I do," I said firmly. "That's what no one realizes. Look, you have to decide once and for all if you really do trust me. If you think I'm a child, too naive to get what's going on with her fragile mind, then you should just keep walking. But if you trust me enough to remember that I've seen things and know things that kind of surpass those of others my age . . . well, then you should also realize that I might know a little about what I'm talking about."

A lukewarm breeze, damp with the scent of melted snow, swirled around us. "I do trust you, Roza. But . . . I don't believe in ghosts."

The earnestness was there. He did want to reach out to me, to understand . . . but even as he did, it warred with beliefs he wasn't ready to change yet. It was ironic, considering tarot cards apparently spooked him.

"Will you try to?" I asked. "Or at the very least try not to write this off to some psychosis?"

"Yes. That I can do."

So I told him about my first couple of Mason sightings and how I'd been afraid to explain the Stan incident to anyone. I talked about the shapes I'd seen on the plane and described in more detail what I'd seen on the ground.

"Doesn't it seem kind of, um, specific for a random stress reaction?" I asked when I finished.

"I don't know that you can really expect 'stress reactions' to be random or specific. They're unpredictable by nature." He had that thoughtful expression I knew so well, the one that told me he was turning over all sorts of things in his head. I could also tell that he still wasn't buying this as a real ghost story but that he was trying very hard to keep an open mind. He affirmed as much a moment later: "Why are you so certain these aren't just things you're imagining?"

"Well, at first I thought I was imagining it all. But now . . . I don't know. There's something about it that feels real . . . even though I know that isn't actually evidence. But you heard what Father Andrew said—about ghosts sticking around after they die young or violently."

Dimitri actually bit his lip. He'd been about to tell me not to take the priest literally. Instead he asked, "So you think Mason's back for revenge?"

"I thought that at first, but now I'm not so sure. He's never tried to hurt me.

He just seems like he wants something. And then . . . all those other ghosts seemed to want something too—even the ones I didn't know. Why?"

Dimitri gave me a sage look. "You have a theory."

"I do. I was thinking about what Victor said. He mentioned that because I'm shadow-kissed—because I died—I have a connection to the world of the dead. That I'll never entirely leave it behind me."

His expression hardened. "I wouldn't put a lot of stock in what Victor Dashkov tells you."

"But he knows things! You know he does, no matter how big an asshole he is."

"Okay, supposing that's true, that being shadow-kissed lets you see ghosts, why is it happening now? Why didn't it happen right after the car accident?"

"I thought of that," I said eagerly. "It was something else Victor said—that now that I was dealing in death, I was that much closer to the other side. What if causing someone else's death strengthened my connection and now makes this possible? I just had my first real kill. Kills, even."

"Why is it so haphazard?" asked Dimitri. "Why does it occur when it does? Why the airplane? Why not at Court?"

My enthusiasm dimmed a little. "What are you, a lawyer?" I snapped. "You question everything I'm saying. I thought you were going to have an open mind."

"I am. But you need to too. Think about it. Why this pattern of sightings?"

"I don't know," I admitted. I sagged in defeat. "You still think I'm crazy."

He reached out and cupped my chin, tipping my face up to look at his. "No. Never. Not one of these theories makes me think you're crazy. But I've always believed the simplest explanation makes sense. Dr. Olendzki's does. The ghost one has holes. But, if you can find out more . . . then we may have something to work with."

"We?" I asked.

"Of course. I'm not leaving you alone on this, no matter what. You know I'd never abandon you."

There was something very sweet and noble about his words, and I felt the need to return them, though mostly I ended up sounding idiotic. "And I won't ever abandon you, you know. I mean it . . . not that this stuff ever happens to you, of course, but if you start seeing ghosts or anything, I'll help you through it."

He gave a small, soft laugh. "Thanks."

Our hands found each other's, fingers lacing together. We stood like that for almost a full minute, neither of us saying anything. The only place we touched was our hands. The breeze picked up again, and although the temperature was probably only in the forties, it felt like spring to me. I expected flowers to burst into bloom around us. As though sharing the same thought, we released our hands at the same time.

We reached my dorm shortly after that, and Dimitri asked if I'd be okay going in on my own. I told him I'd be fine and that he should go do his own thing. He left, but just as I was about to step through the lobby door, I realized my overnight bag was still back at the med clinic. Muttering a few things that would have gotten me a detention, I turned around and hurried back in the

direction I'd just come.

Dr. Olendzski's receptionist motioned me toward the examining rooms when I told her why I was there. I retrieved the bag from my now-empty room and turned into the hall to leave. Suddenly, in the room opposite mine, I saw someone lying in bed. There was no sign of any of the clinic's staff, and my curiosity—always getting the better of me—made me peek inside.

It was Abby Badica, a senior Moroi. *Cute* and *perky* were the adjectives that usually came to mind when I described Abby, but this time, she was anything but. She was bruised and scratched up, and when she turned her face to look at me, I saw red welts.

"Let me guess," I said. "You fell."

"W-what?"

"You fell. I hear that's the standard answer: Brandon, Brett, and Dane. But I'll tell you the truth—you guys need to come up with something else. I think the doctor's getting suspicious."

Her eyes went wide. "You know?"

It was then that I realized my mistake with Brandon. I'd come at him demanding answers, which had made him reluctant to share anything. Those who'd questioned Brett and Dane had faced similar results. With Abby, I realized that I just had to act like I already knew the answers, and then she'd give up the information.

"Of course I know. They told me everything."

"What?" she squeaked. "They swore not to. It's part of the rules."

Rules? What was she talking about? The royal-bashing vigilante group I'd been picturing didn't really seem like the type to have rules. There was something else going on here.

"Well, they didn't have much of a choice. I don't know why, but I keep finding you guys afterward. I had to help cover for them. I'm telling you, I don't know how much longer this can go on without someone asking more questions." I spoke like I was a sympathizer, wanting to help if I could.

"I should have been stronger. I tried, but it wasn't enough." She looked tired—and in pain. "Just keep quiet until everything's set, okay? Please?"

"Sure," I said, dying to know what she'd "tried." "I'm not going to drag anyone else in. How'd you even end up here? You're supposed to avoid attracting attention." Or so I assumed. I was totally making this up as I went along.

She grimaced. "The dorm matron noticed and made me come in. If the rest of the Mână finds out, I'm going to get in trouble."

"Hopefully the doctor'll send you on your way before any of them find out. She's kind of busy. You've got the same marks as Brett and Brandon, and none of theirs were that serious." So I hoped. "The . . . uh, burn marks were a little tricky, but they haven't had any problems."

It was a gamble in my game here. Not only did I have no clue about the specifics of Brett's injuries, I also didn't actually know if those marks Jill had described on him were burns. If they weren't, I might have just blown my insider act. But, she didn't correct me, and her fingers absentmindedly touched one of the welts.

"Yeah, they said the damage wouldn't last. I'll just have to make up

something for Olendzki." A small flicker of hope shone in her eyes. "They said they wouldn't, but maybe . . . maybe they'll let me try again."

It was at that moment that the good doctor returned. She was surprised to see me still there and told me I needed to get back home and rest. I said goodbye to both of them and trekked back out into the cold. I barely noticed the weather as I walked, though. Finally, finally, I had a clue in this puzzle. Mână.

NINETEEN

LISSA HAD BEEN MY best friend ever since elementary school, which was why keeping so many secrets from her lately had hurt so much. She was always open with me, always willing to share what was on her mind—but then, maybe that was because she had no choice. I used to be that way with her, yet at some point, I'd started locking my secrets in, unable to tell her about Dimitri or the real reason I'd messed up with Stan. I hated it being that way. It ate me up inside and made me feel guilty around her.

Today, however, there was absolutely *no* way I could wiggle out of explaining what had happened at the airport. Even if I made up something, the fact that I was on half-time with Christian would be a huge tip-off that something was going on. No excuses this time.

So, as much as it hurt, I gave her and Christian—as well as Eddie and Adrian, who were hanging around—the short version of what had happened.

"You think you saw ghosts?" Christian exclaimed. "Seriously?" The look on his face showed me that he was already building a list of snide comments to make.

"Look," I snapped, "I told you what was going on, but I don't want to elaborate on it. It's getting worked out, so just let it drop."

"Rose . . ." began Lissa uneasily. A hurricane of emotions was beating through to me from her. Fear. Concern. Shock. Her compassion made me feel that much worse.

I shook my head. "No, Liss. Please. You guys can think whatever you want about me or make up your own theories, but we're not going to talk about it. Not now. Just leave me alone about it."

I expected Lissa to badger me because of her normal persistence. I expected Adrian and Christian to because of their irritating natures. But even though

my words had been simple, I realized I'd delivered them with a harshness both in voice and manner. It was Lissa's surprised mental reaction that alerted me to that, and then I needed only to look at the guys' faces to realize I must have sounded incredibly bitchy.

"Sorry," I mumbled. "I appreciate the concern, but I'm just not in the mood."

Lissa eyed me. *Later*, she said in my mind. I gave her a brief nod, secretly wondering how I could avoid that conversation.

She and Adrian had met to practice magic again. I still liked being able to be close to her, but I was only able to do so because Christian was hanging around too. And honestly, I couldn't figure out why he stayed. I guess he was still a little jealous, despite everything that had happened. Of course, if he'd known about the queen's matchmaking schemes, he might have had good reason. Nonetheless, it was clear these magic lessons were starting to bore him. We were in Ms. Meissner's classroom today, and he pulled two desks together and stretched out across them, tossing an arm over his eyes.

"Wake me when it gets interesting," he said.

Eddie and I stood in a central position that let us watch the door and windows while also staying near the Moroi.

"You really saw Mason?" Eddie whispered to me. He turned sheepish. "Sorry . . . you said you didn't want to talk about it. . . ."

I started to say yes, that was exactly what I'd said . . . but then I saw the look on Eddie's face. He wasn't asking me about this out of perverse curiosity. He asked because of Mason, because of their closeness, and because Eddie wasn't over his best friend's death any more than I was. I think he found the idea of Mason communicating from beyond the grave reassuring, but then, he hadn't been the one to actually see Mason's ghost.

"I think it was him," I murmured back. "I don't know. Everyone thinks I imagined it."

"How did he look? Was he upset?"

"He looked . . . sad. Really sad."

"If it was really him . . . I mean, I don't know." Eddie looked at the ground, momentarily forgetting to watch the room. "I've always wondered if he was upset that we didn't save him."

"There was nothing we could have done," I told him, reiterating exactly what everyone had told me. "But I wondered that too, because Father Andrew had mentioned that ghosts sometimes come back for revenge. But Mason didn't look that way. He just seemed like he wanted to tell me something."

Eddie looked back up suddenly, realizing he was still on guard duty. He didn't say anything else after that, but I knew where his thoughts were.

Meanwhile, Adrian and Lissa were making progress. Or rather, Adrian was. The two of them had dug up a bunch of scraggly plants that had died or gone dormant for the winter and put them in little pots. The pots were now lined up in a row on a long table. Lissa touched one, and I felt the euphoria of magic burn within her. A moment later, the scrappy little plant turned green and sprouted leaves.

Adrian stared hard at it, as though it held all the secrets of the universe, and then exhaled deeply. "Okay. Here goes nothing."

He lightly placed his fingers on a different plant. *Here goes nothing* might have been an accurate statement, because nothing actually happened. Then, a few moments later, the plant shuddered a little. A hint of green started to grow in it and then it stopped.

"You did it," said Lissa, impressed. I could also feel that she was a little jealous. Adrian had learned one of her tricks, but she still hadn't learned any of his.

"Hardly," he said, glaring at the plant. He was completely sober, with none of his vices to mellow him. Spirit had nothing to stop it from making him feel irritable. With our moods, we actually had something in common tonight. "Damn it."

"Are you kidding?" she asked. "It was great. You made a plant grow—*with your mind*. That's amazing."

"Not as good as you, though," he said, still sounding like he was ten years old.

I couldn't help but pipe in. "Then stop bitching and try again."

He glanced over at me, a smile twisting his lips. "Hey, no advice, Ghost Girl. Guardians should be seen and not heard." I flipped him off for the "Ghost Girl" comment, but he didn't notice because Lissa was talking to him again.

"She's right. Try it again."

"You do it one more time," he said. "I want to watch you. . . . I can kind of feel what you do to it."

She performed her trick on another plant. I again felt the magic flare up, as well as the joy that came with it—and then she faltered. A flash of fear and instability tinged the magic, smacking a little of when her mental state had deteriorated so badly. *No, no*, I begged silently. *It's happening. I knew it would if she kept using the magic. Please don't let it happen again*.

And like that, the dark spot within her magic went away. All of her thoughts and feelings returned to normal. I noticed then that she'd also made the plant grow. I'd missed it because I'd been distracted by her lapse. Adrian had missed the magic too because his eyes were on me. His expression was troubled and very, very confused.

"Okay," said Lissa happily. She didn't realize he hadn't paid attention. "Try again."

Adrian focused his attention back on their work. Sighing, he moved to a new plant, but she gestured him back. "No, keep working on the one you started. Maybe you can only do it in small bursts."

Nodding, he turned his attention to his original plant. For a few minutes, he just did nothing but stare. Silence reigned in the room. I'd never seen him so focused on anything, and sweat was actually forming on his forehead. Finally, at long last, the plant twitched again. It grew even greener, and tiny buds appeared on it. Glancing up at him, I saw him narrow his eyes and grit his teeth, no doubt concentrating for all he was worth. The buds burst. Leaves and tiny white flowers appeared.

Lissa made what could only be called a whoop of joy. "You did it!" She hugged him, and feelings of delight washed over me from her. She was sincerely happy that he'd been able to do it. And while she was still disappointed at her lack of progress, it inspired hope in her that he'd

replicated her abilities. That meant they truly could learn from each other.

"I can't wait until I'm able to do something new," she said, still a tiny bit jealous.

Adrian tapped a notebook. "Well, there are plenty of other tricks in the world of spirit. You've got to be able to learn at least one of them."

"What's that?" I asked.

"Remember that research I did on people who'd shown weird behaviors?" she asked. "We made a list of all the different things that showed up." I did remember. In her search to find others with spirit, she'd uncovered claims about Moroi demonstrating abilities no one had ever seen. Few people believed the reports were true, but Lissa was convinced they were spirit users.

"Along with healing, auras, and dream walking, we seem to also have some super compulsion going on."

"You already knew that," I said.

"No, this is even more hard-core. It's not just telling people what to do. It's also making them see and feel things that aren't even there."

"What, like hallucinations?" I asked.

"Kind of," he said. "There are stories of people using compulsion to make others live through their worst nightmares, thinking they're being attacked or whatever."

I shivered. "That's actually kind of scary."

"And awesome," said Adrian.

Lissa agreed with me. "I don't know. Regular compulsion is one thing, but that just seems wrong."

Christian yawned. "Now that victory has been achieved, can we call it a night with the magic?"

Glancing behind me, I saw that Christian was sitting up and alert. His eyes were on Lissa and Adrian, and he did *not* look happy about the victory hug. Lissa and Christian had broken apart, though not because they'd noticed his reaction. They were both too distracted by their own excitement to notice his glare.

"Can you do it again?" asked Lissa eagerly. "Make it grow?"

Adrian shook his head. "Not right away. That took a lot out of me. I think I need a cigarette." He gestured in Christian's direction. "Go do something with your guy. He's been terribly patient through all of this."

Lissa walked over to Christian, her face alight with joy. She looked beautiful and radiant, and I could tell it was hard for him to stay too mad at her. The harsh expression on his face softened, and I saw the rare gentleness that only she could bring out in him. "Let's go back to the dorm," she said, grabbing his hand.

We set off. Eddie walked near guard with Lissa and Christian, which left me with far guard. It also left me with Adrian, who had chosen to lag behind and talk to me. He was smoking, so I got to be the one to deal with the toxic cloud that generated. Honestly, I couldn't figure out why no one in charge had busted him for this. I wrinkled my nose at the smell.

"You know, you can always be our far-far guard and stay behind with that thing," I told him.

"Mm, I've had enough." He dropped the cigarette and stamped it out,

leaving it behind. I hated that almost as much as him smoking in the first place.

"What do you think, little dhampir?" he asked. "I was pretty badass with that plant, wasn't I? Of course, it would have been more badass if I'd, I dunno, helped an amputee grow a limb back. Or maybe separated Siamese twins. But that'll come with more practice."

"If you want some advice—which I'm sure you don't—you guys should lay off on the magic. Christian still thinks you're moving in on Lissa."

"What?" he asked in mock astonishment. "Doesn't he know my heart belongs to you?"

"It does not. And no, he's still worried about it, despite what I've told him."

"You know, I bet if we started making out right now, it would make him feel better."

"If you touch me," I said pleasantly, "I'll provide you with the opportunity to see if you can heal yourself. Then we'd see how badass you really are."

"I'd get Lissa to heal me," he said smugly. "It'd be easy for her. Although . . ." The sardonic smirk faded. "Something weird happened when she used her magic."

"Yeah," I said. "I know. Could you sense it too?"

"No. But I *saw* it." He frowned. "Rose . . . remember when you asked about being crazy and I said you weren't?"

"Yeah . . ."

"I think I might have been wrong. I think you are crazy."

I nearly stopped walking. "What the hell does that mean?"

"Well . . . you see, the thing is, when Lissa did the second plant . . . her aura dimmed a little."

"That would go along with what I felt," I said. "It was kind of like she . . . I don't know, grew mentally fragile for a moment, kind of like she used to. But it went away."

He nodded. "Yeah, that's the thing . . . the darkness in her aura went away and into yours. Like, I've noticed before that you guys have a big difference in auras, but this time, I *saw* it happening. It was like that spot of darkness jumped out of hers and into yours."

Something about that made me shiver. "What does it mean?"

"Well, this is why I think you're crazy. Lissa isn't having any side effects from the magic anymore, right? And you, well . . . you've been feeling kind of short-tempered lately and you're, like, seeing ghosts." He said the words casually, like seeing ghosts was just something that happened from time to time. "I think whatever harmful thing there is in spirit that screws with the mind is leaking out of her and into you. It's making her stay stable, and you, well . . . as I said, you're seeing ghosts."

It was like being smacked in the face. A new theory. Not trauma. Not real ghosts. Me "catching" Lissa's madness. I remembered how she'd been at her worst, depressed and self-destructive. I remembered our former teacher, Ms. Karp, who'd also been a spirit user—and completely out of her mind enough to become Strigoi.

"No," I said in a strained voice. "That's not happening to me."

"What about your bond? You have that connection. Her thoughts and

feelings creep into you . . . why not the madness too?" Adrian's manner was typically light and curious. He didn't realize just how much this was starting to freak me out.

"Because it doesn't make any—"

And then, it hit me. The answer we'd been searching for this whole time.

St. Vladimir had struggled his whole life with spirit's side effects. He'd had dreams and delusions, experiences he wrote off to "demons." But he hadn't gone completely crazy or tried to kill himself. Lissa and I had felt certain that it was because he had a shadow-kissed guardian, Anna, and that sharing that bond with her had helped him. We'd assumed it was simply the act of having such a close friend around, someone who could support him and talk him through the bad times since they hadn't had antidepressants or antianxiety drugs back then.

But what if . . . what if . . .

I couldn't breathe. I couldn't go another single moment without knowing the answer. What time was it anyway? An hour or so before curfew? I had to find out. I came to an abrupt halt, nearly slipping on the slick ground.

"Christian!"

The group in front of us stopped and looked back at me and Adrian. "Yeah?" Christian asked.

"I need to take a detour—or rather, *we* do since I can't go anywhere without you. We need to go to the church."

His eyebrows rose in surprise. "What, you need to confess something?"

"Don't ask questions. Please. It'll only take a few minutes."

Concern crossed Lissa's face. "Well, we can all go—"

"No, we'll be fast." I didn't want her there. I didn't want her to hear the answer I was certain I'd get. "Go to the dorm. We'll catch up. Please, Christian?"

He studied me, expression oscillating between wanting to mock me and wanting to help. He wasn't a complete jerk, after all. The latter emotion won out. "Okay, but if you try to get me to pray with you, I walk."

He and I split off toward the chapel. I moved so fast that he had to scurry to keep up.

"I don't suppose you want to tell me what this is about?" he asked.

"Nope. I appreciate your cooperation, though."

"Always glad to help," he said. I was certain he was rolling his eyes, but I was more focused on the path ahead.

We reached the chapel, and the door was locked, unsurprisingly. I knocked on it, staring anxiously around to see if any lights shone through the windows. It didn't look like it.

"You know, I've broken in here before," said Christian. "If you need inside —"

"No, more than that. I need to see the priest. Damn it, he's not here."

"He's probably in bed."

"Damn it," I repeated, feeling only a little bad about swearing on a church's doorstep. If the priest was in bed, he'd be off in Moroi staff housing and inaccessible. "I need to—"

The door opened, and Father Andrew peered out at us. He looked surprised

but not upset. “Rose? Christian? Is something wrong?”

“I have to ask you a question,” I told him. “It won’t take long.”

His surprise grew, but he stepped aside so we could enter. We all stopped and stood in the chapel’s lobby, just outside the main sanctuary.

“I was just about to go home for the night,” Father Andrew told us. “I was shutting everything down.”

“You told me that St. Vladimir lived a long life and died of old age. Is that true?”

“Yes,” he said slowly. “To the best of my knowledge. All the books I’ve read—including these latest ones—say as much.”

“But what about Anna?” I demanded. I sounded like I was on the verge of hysteria. Which I kind of was.

“What about her?”

“What happened to her? How did she die?”

All this time. All this time, Lissa and I had worried about Vlad’s outcome. We’d never considered Anna’s.

“Ah, well.” Father Andrew sighed. “Her end wasn’t as good, I’m afraid. She spent her whole life protecting him, though there are hints that in her old age, she started growing a little unstable too. And then . . .”

“And then?” I asked. Christian was looking between the priest and me, completely lost.

“And then, well, a couple months after St. Vladimir passed on, she committed suicide.”

I squeezed my eyes shut for half a second and then opened them. This was what I’d been afraid of.

“I’m sorry,” Father Andrew said. “I know how closely you’ve followed their story. I didn’t even learn this about her until reading it recently. Taking one’s life is a sin, of course . . . but, well, considering how close they were, it’s not hard to imagine how she may have felt when he was gone.”

“And you also said that she was starting to go a little crazy.”

He nodded and spread his hands out. “It’s hard to say what that poor woman was thinking. Many factors were probably involved. Why was this so pressing?”

I shook my head. “It’s a long story. Thanks for helping me.”

Christian and I were halfway to the dorm before he finally asked, “What was that all about? I remember when you guys were looking into this. Vladimir and Anna were like Lissa and you, right?”

“Yeah,” I said glumly. “Look, I don’t want to get between you guys, but *please* don’t tell Lissa about this. Not until I find out more. Just tell her . . . I don’t know. I’ll tell her that I suddenly panicked because I thought I had more community service scheduled.”

“Both of us lying to her, huh?”

“I hate it, believe me. But it’s also best for her at the moment.”

Because if Lissa knew that she might potentially make me insane . . . yeah, she’d take that hard. She’d want to stop working her magic. Of course, that was what I’d always wanted . . . and yet, I’d felt that joy in her when she used it. Could I take that away from her? Could I sacrifice myself?

There was no easy answer, and I couldn’t start jumping to conclusions. Not

until I knew more. Christian agreed to keep it secret, and by the time we joined the others, it was almost time for curfew anyway. We had only about a half hour together, and then we all split off for bed—including me, since the part-time field experience agreement said I couldn't do nighttime duty. The Strigoi risk was low in general anyway, and my instructors were more concerned about me getting a full night's sleep.

So when curfew came, I walked back to the dhampir dorm alone. And then, when I was almost there, he appeared again.

Mason.

I came to an abrupt halt and glanced around me, wishing someone else was there to witness this and settle the crazy-or-not thing once and for all. His pearly form stood there, hands in the pockets of his coat in an almost casual way that somehow made the experience that much weirder.

"Well," I said, feeling surprisingly calm, despite the sorrow that washed over me whenever I saw him. "Glad to see you're alone again. I didn't really like the extras on the plane."

He stared, expression blank and eyes sad. It made me feel worse, guilt twisting my stomach into knots. I broke.

"What are you?" I cried. "Are you real? Am I going crazy?"

To my surprise, he nodded.

"Which?" I squeaked. "Yes, you're real?"

He nodded.

"Yes, I'm crazy?"

He shook his head.

"Well," I said, forcing a joke through my hurricane of emotions. "That's a relief, but honestly, what else would you say if you're a hallucination?"

Mason just stared. I glanced around again, wishing someone would come by.

"Why are you here? Are you mad at us and looking for revenge?"

He shook his head, and something in me relaxed. Until that moment, I hadn't realized how worried I'd been about that. The guilt and grief had been wound up so tightly in me. Him blaming me—just as Ryan had—had seemed inevitable.

"Are you . . . are you having trouble finding peace?"

Mason nodded and seemed to grow sadder. I thought back to his final moments and swallowed back tears. I'd probably have a hard time finding peace too, taken from my life before it began.

"Is there more than that, though? Another reason you keep coming to me?"

He nodded.

"What?" I asked. There were too many questions lately. I needed answers. "What is it? What do I need to do?"

But anything other than a yes or no question was beyond us, apparently. He opened up his mouth as though he would say something. He looked like he was trying hard, like Adrian had with the plant. But no sound came out.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "I'm sorry I don't understand . . . and . . . I'm sorry for everything else."

Mason gave me one last wistful look and then vanished.

TWENTY

"LET'S TALK ABOUT YOUR MOTHER."

I sighed. "What about her?"

It was my first day of counseling, and so far, I wasn't impressed. Last night's Mason sighting was probably something I should have brought up right away. But I didn't want school officials to have any more reason to think I was losing my mind—even if I was.

And honestly, I didn't know I was for sure. Adrian's analysis of my aura and the story of Anna certainly lent credence to me being on the road to Crazyville. Yet I didn't feel crazy. Did crazy people know if they really were? Adrian had said they didn't. *Crazy* itself was a weird term. I'd learned enough about psychology to know that it was also a very broad classification. Most forms of mental illness were actually very specific and had select symptoms—anxiety, depression, mood swings, etc. I didn't know where I fell on that scale, if I did at all.

"How do you feel about her?" continued the counselor. "About your mother?"

"That she's a great guardian and a so-so mother."

The counselor, whose name was Deirdre, wrote something in her notebook. She was blond and Moroi-slim, clad in a teal cashmere sweater dress. She actually didn't look much older than me, but certificates on her desk swore she had all sorts of degrees in psychotherapy. Her office was in the administrative building, the same place the headmistress's office was, and where all other sorts of Academy business was conducted. I'd kind of been hoping for a couch to lie on, like therapists always had on TV, but the best I had was a chair. It was a comfy chair, at least. The walls were covered in nature pictures, things like butterflies and daffodils. I guess they were

supposed to be soothing.

"Do you want to elaborate on 'so-so'?" Deirdre asked.

"It's an upgrade. A month ago I would have said 'horrible. ' What's this have to do with Mason?"

"Do you want to talk about Mason?"

I'd noticed she had a habit of answering my questions with questions.

"I don't know," I admitted. "I guess that's what I'm here for."

"How do you feel about him? About his death?"

"Sad. How else should I feel?"

"Angry?"

I thought about the Strigoi, their leering faces and casual attitudes toward killing. "Yeah, a little."

"Guilty?"

"Sure, of course."

"Why 'of course'?"

"Because it's my fault he was there. I'd upset him . . . and he had this thing to prove. I told him where the Strigoi were, and I wasn't supposed to. If he hadn't known about them, he wouldn't have done it. He'd still be alive."

"You don't think he was responsible for his own actions? That he was the one who chose to do that?"

"Well . . . yeah. I guess he did. I didn't make him do it."

"Any other reason you might feel guilty?"

I looked away from her and focused on a picture of a lady-bug. "He liked me—like romantically. We kind of dated, but I couldn't get into it. That hurt him."

"Why couldn't you get into it?"

"I don't know," I said. The image of his body, lying on the floor, flashed into my mind and I shoved it away. No way would I cry in front of Deirdre. "That's the thing. I should have. He was nice. He was funny. We got along really well . . . but it just didn't feel right. Even kissing or anything like that . . . I eventually just couldn't do it."

"Do you feel like you have a problem with intimate contact?"

"What do you—? Oh. No! Of course not."

"Have you ever had sex with anyone?"

"No. Are you saying I should have?"

"Do you think you should have?"

Damn. I'd thought I had her. I'd thought for sure she wouldn't have a question for that one. "Mason wasn't the right person."

"Is there someone else? Someone you think might be the right person?"

I hesitated. I'd lost track of how this related to me seeing ghosts. According to some paperwork I'd signed, everything we said in here was confidential. She couldn't tell anyone unless I was a danger to myself or doing something illegal. I wasn't entirely sure where a relationship with an older man fell there.

"Yeah . . . but I can't tell you who he is."

"How long have you known him?"

"Almost six months."

"Do you feel close?"

"Yeah, sure. But we're not . . ." How exactly did one describe this? "We're

not actually really involved. He's kind of . . . unavailable." She could think what she wanted about that, like that maybe I was interested in a guy with a girlfriend.

"Is he the reason you couldn't get close to Mason?"

"Yes."

"And is he holding you back from dating someone else?"

"Well . . . he's not like purposely doing anything."

"But as long as you care about him, you're not interested in anyone else?"

"Right. But it doesn't matter. I probably shouldn't even be dating anyone at all."

"Why not?"

"Because there's no time. I'm training to be a guardian. I have to give all my attention to Lissa."

"And you don't think you can do that and be romantically involved with someone?"

I shook my head. "No. I have to be willing to lay down my life for hers. I can't be distracted by someone else. We have this saying with the guardians: 'They come first.' You guys. Moroi."

"And so you figure you'll always have to put Lissa's needs ahead of yours?"

"Of course." I frowned. "What else would I do? I'm going to be her guardian."

"How does that make you feel? Giving up what you want for her?"

"She's my best friend. And she's the last of her family."

"That's not what I asked."

"Yeah, but—" I stopped. "Hey, you didn't ask a question."

"You think I always ask questions?"

"Never mind. Look, I love Lissa. I'm happy to spend my life protecting her. End of story. Besides, are you, a Moroi, going to tell me, a dhampir, that I shouldn't be putting Moroi first? You know how the system works."

"I do," she said. "But I'm not here to analyze it. I'm here to help you get better."

"Seems like you might not be able to do one without the other."

Deirdre's lips quirked into a smile, and then her eyes flicked to the clock. "We're out of time today. We'll have to pick this up next time."

I crossed my arms over my chest. "I thought you'd be giving me some kind of awesome advice or telling me what to do. But you just kept making me talk."

She laughed softly. "Therapy isn't so much about what I think as you do."

"Then why do it at all?"

"Because we don't always know what it is we're thinking or feeling. When you have a guide, it's easier to figure things out. You'll often discover that you already know what to do. I can help you ask questions and go places you might not have on your own."

"Well, you're good at the question part," I noted dryly.

"While I don't have any 'awesome advice,' I do have some things I want you to think about for when we talk again." She glanced down at her notepad and tapped it with her pencil while she thought. "First, I want you to think again about what I asked about Lissa—how you really feel about dedicating your life

to her."

"I already told you."

"I know. Just think about it some more. If your answer's the same, that's fine. Then, I want you to consider something else. I want you to think about whether maybe the reason you're attracted to this unavailable guy is *because* he's unavailable."

"That's crazy. That doesn't make any sense."

"Is it? You just told me that you can't ever be involved with anyone. Do you think it's possible that wanting someone you can't have is your subconscious mind's way of coping? If it's impossible for you to have him, then you never have to confront feeling conflicted about Lissa. You'll never have to choose."

"This is confusing," I grumbled.

"It's supposed to be. That's why I'm here."

"What's this have to do with Mason?"

"It has to do with you, Rose. That's what's important."

I left therapy feeling like my brain had melted. I also kind of felt like I'd been on trial. If Deirdre had been there to grill Victor, they probably would have finished up in half the time.

I *also* thought Deirdre had totally been going in the wrong direction. Of course I didn't resent Lissa. And the thought that I'd fallen for Dimitri because I couldn't have him was ridiculous. I'd never even thought of the conflict with guarding until he'd mentioned it. I'd fallen for him because . . . well, because he was Dimitri. Because he was sweet, strong, funny, fierce, and gorgeous. Because he understood me.

And yet, as I walked back to the commons, I found her question spinning around in my brain. I might not have been thinking about a relationship distracting us in our guard duties, but I'd certainly known from the start that his age and job were huge barriers. Could that have really played a part? Had some piece of me known we could never really have anything—thus allowing me to always stay dedicated to Lissa?

No, I decided firmly. That was ridiculous. Deirdre might be good at asking questions, but she was clearly asking the wrong ones.

"Rose!"

I looked to my right and saw Adrian cutting across the lawn toward me, oblivious to the slush's effects on his designer shoes.

"Did you just call me 'Rose'?" I asked. "And not 'little dhampir'? I don't think that's ever happened."

"It happens all the time," he countered, catching up to me.

We stepped inside the commons. School was in session, so the halls were empty.

"Where's your better half?" he asked.

"Christian?"

"No, Lissa. You can tell where she is, right?"

"Yeah, I can tell because it's last period, and she's in class like everyone else. You keep forgetting that for the rest of us, this is a school."

He looked disappointed. "I found more case files I wanted to talk to her about. More super-compulsion stuff."

"Whoa, you've been doing something productive? I'm impressed."

"You're one to talk," he said. "Especially considering your whole existence here revolves around beating people up. You dhampirs are uncivilized—but then, that's why we love you."

"Actually," I mused, "we aren't the only ones doing beatings lately." I'd nearly forgotten about my royal fight club mystery. There were so many things I had to worry about lately. It was like trying to hold water in my hands. It was a long shot, but I had to ask him. "Does the word *Mână* mean anything to you?"

He leaned against the wall and reached for his cigarettes. "Sure."

"You're inside the school," I warned.

"What—oh, right." With a sigh, he put the pack back in his coat. "Don't half of you study Romanian here? It means 'hand.'"

"I study English here." Hand. That didn't make any sense.

"Why the interest in translation?"

"I don't know. I think I got it wrong. I thought it had some connection to this thing that's been going on with these royals."

Recognition flashed in his eyes. "Oh Lord. Not that. Are they really doing it here too?"

"Doing what?"

"The Mână. The Hand. It's this stupid secret society that pops up at schools. We had a chapter of it back at Alder. It's mostly a bunch of royals getting together and having secret meetings to talk about how much better they are than everyone else."

"That's it then," I said. The pieces clicked together. "That's Jesse and Ralf's little group—the one they tried to get Christian to join. That's what this Mână is."

"Him?" Adrian laughed. "They must have been desperate—and I don't mean that as a slam against Christian. He's just not really the type to get into that kind of thing."

"Yeah, well, he turned them down pretty hard. What's the point of this secret society exactly?"

He shrugged. "The same as any other. It's a way to make people feel better about themselves. Everyone likes feeling special. Being part of an elite group is a way to do that."

"But you weren't part of it?"

"No need. I already know I'm special."

"Jesse and Ralf made it sound like royals had to stick together because of all the controversies that are going on—about fighting and guardians and all that. They made it sound like they could do something about it."

"Not at this age," said Adrian. "Mostly all they can do is talk. When they get older, Mână members sometimes cut deals for each other and still have secret meetings."

"That's it then? They're just hanging out and talking to hear themselves talk?"

He turned contemplative. "Well, yes, of course they're doing lots of that. But I mean, whenever these little chapters form, there's usually something *specific* they want to do in secret. Each group's kind of different that way, so this one's

probably got some plan or scheme or whatever." A plan or scheme. I didn't like the sound of that. Especially with Jesse and Ralf.

"You know a lot for someone who wasn't in it."

"My dad was. He never talks much about it—hence the secret part—but I picked up things, and then I heard about it while I was at school."

I leaned against the wall. The clock across the hall told me classes were almost over. "Did you hear anything about them beating up people? There are at least four Moroi I know of who were attacked. And they won't talk about it."

"Who? Like non-royals?"

"No. Other royals."

"That doesn't make any sense. The whole point of it is for elite royals to band together to protect themselves from change. Unless, perhaps, they're going after royals who refuse or are supporting non-royals."

"Maybe. But one of them was Jesse's brother, and Jesse seems to be a founding member. Seems like he'd have to make the cut. *And* they didn't do anything when Christian refused."

Adrian spread his hands wide. "Even I don't know everything, and like I said, this one's probably got its own little agenda they're keeping hidden." I sighed in frustration, and he gave me a curious look. "Why do you care so much?"

"Because it isn't right. The people I saw were in bad shape. If some group's going around and ganging up on victims, they need to be stopped."

Adrian laughed and played with a strand of my hair. "You can't save everyone, though God knows you try."

"I just want to do what's right." I remembered Dimitri's comments about Westerns and couldn't help a small smile. "I need to bring justice where it's needed."

"The crazy thing, little dhampir, is that you mean that. I can tell by your aura."

"What, are you saying it's not black anymore?"

"No . . . still dark, definitely. But it's got a little light in it, streaks of gold. Like sunlight."

"Maybe your theory about me catching it from Lissa is wrong then." I'd been trying very hard not to think about last night, when I'd learned about Anna. Mentioning it now stirred up all those fears all over again. Insanity. Suicide.

"Depends," he said. "When was the last time you saw her?"

I gave him a light punch. "You have no clue, do you? You're making this up as you go along."

He caught my wrist and pulled me closer. "Isn't that the way you normally operate?"

I grinned in spite of myself. This close to him I could appreciate just how lovely the green of his eyes was. In fact, despite continually making fun of him, I couldn't deny that the rest of him was pretty good-looking too. His fingers were warm on my wrist, and there was something kind of sexy about the way he held it. Thinking back to Deirdre's words, I tried to assess how it all made me feel. The queen's warnings aside, Adrian was a guy who was

technically available. Was I attracted to him? Did I get a thrill out of this?

The answer: no. Not in the same way I did with Dimitri. Adrian was sexy in his way, but he didn't drive me wild the way Dimitri did. Was it because Adrian was so readily available? Was Deirdre right about me purposely wanting relationships that were impossible?

"You know," he said, interrupting my thoughts, "under any other circumstances, this would be hot. Instead, you're looking at me like I'm some kind of science fair project."

That was exactly how I was treating this, actually. "Why don't you ever use compulsion on me?" I asked. "And I don't mean just to stop me from getting in fights."

"Because half the fun of you is that you're so difficult."

A new idea occurred to me. "Do it."

"Do what?"

"Use compulsion on me."

"What?" It was another of those rare shocked Adrian moments.

"Use compulsion to make me want to kiss you—except you have to promise not to actually kiss me."

"That's pretty weird—and when *I* say something's weird, you know it's serious."

"Please."

He sighed and then focused his eyes right on me. It was like drowning, drowning in seas of green. There was nothing in the world except for those eyes.

"I want to kiss you, Rose," he said softly. "And I want you to want me too."

Every aspect of his body—his lips, his hands, his scent— suddenly overpowered me. I felt warm all over. I wanted him to kiss me with every ounce of my being. There was nothing in life I wanted more than that kiss. I tilted my face up toward his, and he leaned down. I could practically taste his lips.

"Do you want to?" he asked, voice still like velvet. "Do you want to kiss me?"

Did I ever. Everything around me had blurred. Only his lips were in focus.

"Yes," I said. His face moved closer, his mouth only a breath away from mine. We were so, so close, and then—

He stopped. "We're done," he said, stepping back.

I snapped out of it instantly. The dreamy haze was gone, as was the yearning in my body. But I'd discovered something. Under compulsion, I had definitely wanted him to kiss me. Yet even under compulsion, it hadn't been the electric, all-encompassing feeling I had when I was with Dimitri, that feeling that we were practically the same person and were bound by forces bigger than both of us. With Adrian, it had simply been mechanical.

Deirdre had been wrong. If my attraction to Dimitri was just some subconscious reaction, then it should have been as superficial as that forced attraction to Adrian. Yet they were completely different. With Dimitri, it was love—not just some trick my mind was playing on me.

"Hmm," I said.

"Hmm?" asked Adrian, eyeing me with amusement.

"Hmm."

The third "hmm" hadn't come from either of us. I looked across the hall and saw Christian watching us. I separated from Adrian, just as the bell rang. The sounds of students pouring out of classrooms rumbled through the hallway.

"Now I can see Lissa," said Adrian happily.

"Rose, will you come with me to the feeders?" asked Christian. He spoke in a flat tone, and his expression was unreadable.

"I'm not guarding you today."

"Yeah, well, I miss your charming company."

I told Adrian goodbye and cut through the cafeteria with Christian. "What's up?" I asked.

"You tell me," he said. "You were the one about ready to start making out with Adrian."

"It was an experiment," I said. "It was part of my therapy."

"What the hell kind of therapy are you in?"

We reached the feeders' room. Somehow, despite him getting out of class early, there were still a few people ahead of us in line.

"Why do you care?" I asked him. "You should be happy. It means he isn't moving in on Lissa."

"He could be moving in on both of you."

"What are you, my big brother now?"

"Annoyed," he said. "That's what I am."

I looked beyond him and saw Jesse and Ralf enter. "Well, keep it to yourself, or our good friends will overhear."

Jesse, however, was too busy to hear, because he was arguing with the feeding coordinator. "I don't have time to wait," he told her. "I've got to be somewhere."

She pointed to us and the others in line. "These people are ahead of you."

Jesse met her eyes and smiled. "You can make an exception this time."

"Yeah, he's in a hurry," added Ralf in a voice I'd never heard him use before. It was smooth and less grating than usual. "Just write his name down at the top of the list."

The coordinator looked like she was going to tell them off, but then a funny, distracted look came over her face. She glanced at her clipboard and wrote something. A few seconds after she looked away, her head jerked up again, eyes sharp once more. She frowned.

"What was I doing?"

"You were signing me up," said Jesse. He pointed at the board. "See?"

She looked down, startled. "Why is your name first? Didn't you just get here?"

"We were here earlier and checked in. You told us it was okay."

She looked down again, clearly puzzled. She didn't remember them coming earlier—because they hadn't—but she apparently couldn't figure out why Jesse's name was at the top now. A moment later, she shrugged and must have decided it wasn't worth overthinking. "Stand with the others, and I'll call you next."

As soon as Jesse and Ralf came near us, I turned on them. "You just used compulsion on her," I hissed.

Jesse looked panicked for a fraction of a second; then his normal swagger took over. “Whatever. I just convinced her, that’s all. What, are you going to try to tell on me or something?”

“Nothing to tell,” scoffed Christian. “That was the worst compulsion I’ve ever seen.”

“Like you’ve seen compulsion,” said Ralf.

“Plenty,” said Christian. “From people prettier than you. Of course, maybe that’s part of why yours isn’t as good.”

Ralf seemed highly offended at not being considered pretty, but Jesse just nudged him and started to turn away. “Forget him. He had his chance.”

“His chance at—” I remembered how Brandon had attempted weak compulsion when trying to convince me his bruises were nothing. Jill had said that Brett Ozera actually *had* convinced a teacher that his were nothing. The teacher had dropped the matter, much to Jill’s surprise. Brett must have used compulsion. Lightbulbs went off in different parts of my brain. The connections were all around me. The problem was, I couldn’t untangle the wires quite yet. “That’s what this is about, isn’t it? Your stupid Mână and its need to beat up on people. It’s got something to do with compulsion. . . .”

I didn’t understand how it all fit together, but the surprised look on Jesse’s face told me I was on to something, even though he said, “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I pushed forward, hoping some blind hits would make him mad and say something he wasn’t supposed to. “What’s the point? Does it give you guys some kind of power trip to do these little tricks? That’s all they are, you know. You seriously don’t know the first thing about compulsion. I’ve seen compulsion that would make you do handstands and throw yourself out a window.”

“We’re learning more than you can even imagine,” said Jesse. “And when I find out who told—”

He didn’t get a chance to finish his threat because he was called over to the feeder just then. He and Ralf stalked away, and Christian immediately turned to me.

“What’s going on? What’s a Mână?”

I gave him a hasty recap of Adrian’s explanation. “That’s what they wanted you to join. They must secretly be practicing compulsion. Adrian said these groups are always royals who have some plan to change and control things in dangerous times. They must think compulsion is the answer—it’s what they meant when they told you they had ways to help you get what you wanted. If they knew how crappy your compulsion was, they probably wouldn’t have asked.”

He scowled, not liking me reminding him of the one time he’d attempted—and failed—to compel someone at the ski lodge. “So where’s the beating-people-up part come in?”

“That’s the mystery,” I said. Christian was summoned over to feed just then, and I put my theories on hold until I could get more info and take action. I noticed which feeder we were being led to. “Is that Alice *again*? How do you always get her? Do you request her?”

“No, but I think some people specifically un-request her.”

Alice was happy to see us, as always. “Rose. Are you still keeping us safe?”

“I will if they’ll let me,” I told her.

“Don’t be too hasty,” she warned. “Conserve your strength. If you’re too eager to fight the undead, you may find yourselves joining them. Then you’d never see us again, and we’d be very sad.”

“Yes,” said Christian. “I’d cry into my pillow every night.”

I resisted the urge to kick him. “Well, I couldn’t visit if I was Strigoi, yeah, but hopefully I’d just die a normal death. Then I could come see you as a ghost.”

How sad, I thought, that I was now making jokes about the very thing that was freaking me out lately. Alice found no amusement in it whatsoever. She shook her head.

“No, you wouldn’t. The wards would keep you out.”

“The wards only keep Strigoi out,” I reminded her gently.

A defiant look replaced her scattered one. “The wards keep anything that isn’t alive out. Dead or undead.”

“Now you’ve done it,” said Christian.

“The wards don’t keep ghosts out,” I said. “I’ve seen them.”

Considering Alice’s own instability, I didn’t mind discussing mine with her. In fact, it was kind of refreshing to talk about this stuff with someone who wouldn’t judge me. Indeed, she treated this as a perfectly normal conversation.

“If you’ve seen ghosts, then we’re not safe anymore.”

“I told you last time, the security’s too good.”

“Maybe someone made a mistake,” she argued, sounding remarkably coherent. “Maybe someone missed something. Wards are made of magic. Magic is alive. Ghosts can’t cross them for the same reason as Strigoi. They aren’t alive. If you saw a ghost, the wards have failed.” She paused. “Or you’re crazy.”

Christian laughed out loud. “There you go, Rose. Straight from the source.” I shot him a glare. He smiled at Alice. “In Rose’s defense, though, I think she’s right about the wards. The school checks them all the time. The only place guarded better than here is the Royal Court, and both places are overflowing with guardians. Stop being so paranoid.”

He fed, and I glanced away. I should have known better than to listen to Alice. She was hardly a reputable source of information, even if she’d been around for a while. And yet . . . her weird logic did make sense. If wards kept Strigoi out, why not ghosts? True, Strigoi were the dead who had come back to walk the earth, but her point was sound: *All* of them were dead. But Christian and I were right too: The wards around the school were solid. It took a lot of power to lay wards. Not every Moroi home could have them, but places like schools and the Royal Court had theirs maintained diligently.

The Royal Court . . .

I’d had no ghostly encounters whatsoever while we there, yet that had been incredibly stressful. If my sightings were stress-induced, wouldn’t the Court and encounters with Victor and the queen have provided great opportunities for them to occur? The fact that I’d seen nothing seemed to negate the PTSD theory. I hadn’t seen ghosts until we’d landed at the Martinville airport.

Which didn't have wards.

I nearly gasped. The Court had strong wards. I'd seen no ghosts. The airport, which was part of the human world, had no wards. I'd been bombarded with ghosts there. I'd also seen flashes of them on the plane—which was unwarded when we were in the air.

I looked over at Alice and Christian. They were just about finished. Could she be right? Did wards keep out ghosts? And if so, what was going on with the school? If the wards were intact, I should see nothing—just like at Court. If the wards were broken, I should be overrun—just like at the airport. Instead, the Academy was somewhere in the middle. I had sightings only occasionally. It didn't make sense.

The only thing I knew for sure was that if something was wrong with the school's wards, then I wasn't the only one in danger.

TWENTY-ONE

I COULD HARDLY WAIT for my day to end. I'd promised Lissa I'd hang out with her and the others after school. It should have been fun, but the minutes dragged by. I was too restless. When curfew came around, I split off from them ran back to my dorm. I asked the woman at the front desk if she could call up to Dimitri's room—off-limits to students—because I had an "urgent" question for him. She had just picked up the phone when Celeste walked past.

"He's not there," she told me. She had a large bruise on the side of her face. Some novice had gotten the better of her—some novice who wasn't me. "I think he was going to the chapel. You'll have to see him tomorrow—you can't be there and back before curfew comes."

I nodded meekly and acted like I was heading for the student wing. Instead, as soon as she was out of sight, I headed back outside again and ran to the chapel. She was right. I wasn't going to make curfew, but hopefully Dimitri could make sure I got back without getting in trouble.

The chapel's doors were unlocked when I reached them. I walked in and saw all the candles lit, making all the gold ornaments in the room sparkle. The priest must still be working. But, when I stepped inside the sanctuary, he wasn't there. Dimitri was, however.

He sat in the last pew. He wasn't praying or kneeling or anything. He just sat there, looking quite relaxed. Although he wasn't a practicing member of the church, he'd told me he often found peace there. It gave him a chance to think about his life and the deeds he'd done.

I always thought he looked good, but just then, something about him nearly made me come to a standstill. Maybe it was because of the background, all the polished wood and colorful icons of saints. Maybe it was just the way the candlelight shone on his dark hair. Maybe it was just because he looked

unguarded, almost vulnerable. He was normally so wound up, so on edge . . . but even he needed the occasional moment of rest. He seemed to glow in my eyes, kind of in the way Lissa always did. His normal tension returned when he heard me come in.

"Rose, is everything okay?" He started to stand, and I motioned him down as I slid into the spot beside him. The faint smell of incense lingered in the air.

"Yeah . . . well, kind of. No breakdowns, if that's what you're worried about. I just had a question. Or, well, a theory."

I explained the conversation with Alice and what I'd deduced from it. He listened patiently, expression thoughtful.

"I know Alice. I'm not sure she's credible," he said when I finished. It was similar to what he'd said about Victor.

"I know. I thought the same thing. But a lot of it makes sense."

"Not quite. As you pointed out, why are your visions so irregular here? That doesn't go along with the ward theory. You should feel like you did on the plane."

"What if the wards are just weak?" I asked.

He shook his head. "That's impossible. Wards take months to wear down. New ones are put in place here every two weeks."

"That often?" I asked, unable to hide my disappointment. I'd known maintenance was frequent but not *that* frequent. Alice's theory had almost provided a sound explanation, one that didn't involve me being insane.

"Maybe they're getting staked," I suggested. "By humans or something—like we saw before."

"Guardians walk the grounds a few times a day. If there was a stake in the borders of campus, we'd notice."

I sighed.

Dimitri moved his hand over mine, and I flinched. He didn't remove it, though, and as he did so frequently, guessed my thoughts. "You thought if she was right, it would explain everything."

I nodded. "I don't want to be crazy."

"You aren't crazy."

"But you don't believe I'm really seeing ghosts."

He glanced away, his eyes staring at the flickering of candles on the altar. "I don't know. I'm still trying to keep an open mind. And being stressed isn't the same as being crazy."

"I know," I admitted, still very conscious of how warm his hand was. I shouldn't have been thinking about things like that in a church. "But . . . well . . . there's something else. . . ."

I told him then about Anna possibly "catching" Vladimir's insanity. I also explained Adrian's aura observations. He turned his gaze back on me, expression speculative.

"Have you told anyone else about this? Lissa? Your counselor?"

"No," I said in a small voice, unable to meet his eyes. "I was afraid of what they'd think."

He squeezed my hand. "You have to stop this. You aren't afraid of throwing yourself in the path of danger, but you're terrified of letting anyone in."

"I . . . I don't know," I said, looking up at him. "I guess."

"Then why'd you tell me?"

I smiled. "Because you told me I should trust people. I trust you."

"You don't trust Lissa?"

My smile faltered. "I trust her, absolutely. But I don't want to tell her things that'll make her worry. I guess it's a way of protecting her, just like keeping Strigoi away."

"She's stronger than you think," he said. "And she would go out of her way to help you."

"So what? You want me to confide in her and not you?"

"No, I want you to confide in both of us. I think it'd be good for you. Does what happened to Anna bother you?"

"No." I looked away again. "It scares me."

I think the admission stunned both of us. I certainly hadn't expected to say it. We both froze for a moment, and then Dimitri wrapped his arms around me and pulled me to his chest. A sob built up in me as I rested my cheek against the leather of his coat and heard the steady beating of his heart.

"I don't want to be like that," I told him. "I want to be like everyone else. I want my mind to be . . . normal. Normal by Rose standards, I mean. I don't want to lose control. I don't want to be like Anna and kill myself. I love being alive. I'd die to save my friends, but I hope it doesn't happen. I hope we all live long, happy lives. Like Lissa said—one big happy family. There's so much I want to do, but I'm so scared . . . scared that I'll be like her. . . . I'm afraid I won't be able to stop it. . . ."

He held me tighter. "It's not going to happen," he murmured. "You're wild and impulsive, but at the end of the day, you're one of the strongest people I know. Even if you are the same as Anna—and I don't think you are—you two won't share the same fate."

It was funny. I'd often told Lissa the same thing about her and Vladimir. She'd always had a hard time believing it, and now I understood. Giving advice was a lot harder than following it.

"You're also missing something," he continued, running a hand over my hair. "If you are in danger from Lissa's magic, then at least you understand why. She can stop using her magic, and that'll be the end of it."

I pulled away slightly so I could look at him. Hastily, I ran my hand over my eyes in case any tears had escaped.

"But can I ask her to do that?" I said. "I've felt how it makes her feel. I don't know if I can take that away from her."

He regarded me with surprise. "Even at the cost of your own life?"

"Vladimir did great things—so could she. Besides, they come first, right?"

"Not always."

I stared. I'd had *they come first* drilled into me since I was a child. It was what all guardians believed. Only the dhampirs who'd run away from their duty didn't subscribe to that. What he said was almost like treason.

"Sometimes, Rose, you have to know when to put yourself first."

I shook my head. "Not with Lissa." I might as well have been with Deirdre or Ambrose again. Why was everyone suddenly challenging something that I'd held as absolute truth my entire life?

"She's your friend. She'll understand." To make his point, he reached

forward and tugged at the *chotki* peeking out underneath my sleeve, his fingertips brushing my wrist.

"It's more than that," I said. I pointed to the cross. "If anything, *this* proves it. I'm bound to her, to protect the Dragomirs, at all costs."

"I know, but . . ." He didn't finish, and honestly, what could he have said? This was becoming an old argument, one without a solution.

"I need to get back," I said abruptly. "It's past curfew."

A wry smile crossed Dimitri's face. "And you need me to get you back or you'll get in trouble."

"Well, yeah, I was kind of hoping. . . ."

We heard some rustling near the door of the sanctuary, and Father Andrew walked in, which definitely ended our session. He was getting ready to shut down the chapel. Dimitri thanked him, and then the two of us headed back to the dhampir dorm. Neither of us spoke along the way, but it was a comfortable silence. It was weird, but since his outburst outside the med clinic, I felt like something had intensified between us, as impossible as that seemed.

Dimitri got me past the woman at the front desk, and just as I was about to head off for my wing, a guardian named Yuri walked by. Dimitri called to him.

"You've been working with security, haven't you? When was the last time they laid new wards?"

Yuri considered. "A couple days ago. Why?"

Dimitri gave me a meaningful look. "Just curious."

I nodded to Dimitri to show that I understood his point, and then I went off to bed.

After that, the next week or so played out in a repetitive pattern. I followed Christian for three days a week, had my counseling sessions, and trained with Dimitri. During those times, I could see the concern on Dimitri's face. He always asked how I was but didn't push me to talk about anything I didn't want to. Mostly, it was all physical training, which I liked since it didn't require too much ruminating.

Best of all, I didn't see Mason during this time.

I also didn't witness any attacks—of either the Mână type or the guardian type.

We were in full throes of the field experience, and every other novice in my class was having regular fights. The tests grew intricate and more difficult, and everyone had to stay on their toes. Eddie seemed to have to defend Lissa every other day from some guardian playing Strigoi—but it never happened when I was around. In fact, no attacks at all happened to anyone when I was around. After a while, I began to get the idea. They were going soft on me. They were worried I couldn't handle it.

"They might as well have cut me from the field experience after all," I grumbled to Christian one evening. "I'm not doing anything."

"Yeah, but if you still pass, why worry about it? I mean, do you actually want to get in a fight every day?" He then rolled his eyes. "Never mind. Of *course* you do."

"You don't understand," I told him. "This job isn't about taking the easy way out. I want to prove what I can do—to them and to myself. You can never get enough practice. I mean, Lissa's life is at stake." And also possibly my future with her. I'd worried before that they might decide to replace me—and that was *before* they thought I was nuts.

It was nearly curfew time, and I was dropping him off for the night. He shook his head. "Rose, I don't know if you're crazy or not, but I'm actually starting to think you might be the best guardian—or soon-to-be guardian—out there."

"Did you just give me a serious compliment?" I asked.

He turned his back on me and headed inside his dorm. "Good night."

My life was still in chaos, but I couldn't help a small grin as I headed back toward my dorm. The walk always made me nervous since I now lived in perpetual fear of seeing Mason. There were other people scurrying back before curfew too, though, and he mostly tended to show up when I was alone, either because he preferred the privacy or because he really was a figment of my imagination.

Talking about Lissa reminded me that I'd hardly seen her today. Comfortable and content, I let my mind slip into hers while my body continued its walk.

She was in the library, hurriedly trying to finish up some notes. Eddie stood near her, glancing around. "Better hurry up," he said teasingly. "She's making another round."

"Almost done," Lissa said, scrawling a few more words.

She shut the textbook just as the librarian came by and told them they had to leave now. With a sigh of relief, Lissa stuffed her papers into her bag and followed Eddie out. He picked it up and carried it over his shoulder as they went.

"You don't have to do that," she said. "You aren't my valet."

"You can have it back as soon as you fix that." He gestured to where she was tangled up in her coat. She'd shoved it on while trying to get out of the library on time. She laughed at her own disorderliness and adjusted the inside-out sleeve.

"Thanks," she said when he handed it back.

"No problem."

Lissa liked Eddie—though not in a romantic kind of way. She just thought he was nice. He did things like that all the time, helping her out while still doing an excellent job in his duties. His motives weren't romantic, either. He was just one of those rare guys who could be both a gentleman and a badass. She had plans for him.

"Have you ever thought about asking Rose out?"

"What?" he asked.

What? I thought.

"You guys just have so much in common," she said, trying to sound casual. Inside, she was excited. She thought this was the best idea in the world. For me, it was one of those moments where being in her mind was being *too* close to her. I would rather have been standing beside her so I could shake some sense into her.

“She’s just my friend,” he laughed, his face taking on kind of a cute shyness. “And I don’t think we’d actually be that compatible. Besides . . .” His expression fell. “I could never go out with Mason’s girlfriend.”

Lissa started to say what I always told her, that I hadn’t actually been Mason’s girlfriend. Wisely, she instead chose to let Eddie keep believing the best. “Everyone has to move on sometime.”

“It hasn’t been that long, not really. Just over a month. And it’s not really something you get over quickly.” His eyes had a sad, faraway look that hurt both Lissa and me.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t mean to make it sound like something small. What you saw—I know it was horrible.”

“You know what’s weird? I actually don’t remember much of it. And *that’s* what’s horrible. I was so drugged out that I had no idea what was going on. I hate that—you have no idea. Being helpless like that . . . it’s the worst thing in the world.”

I felt the same way. I think it was a guardian thing. Eddie and I had never talked about it, though. We’d never even talked about Spokane much.

“It wasn’t your fault,” Lissa told him. “Strigoi endorphins are strong. You couldn’t have fought against them.”

“I should have tried harder,” he countered, holding the door to her dorm open. “If I’d been even a little more conscious . . . I don’t know. Mason might still be alive.”

Eddie and I, I realized, should both have been in therapy as soon as we got back from winter break. I finally understood why everyone said blaming myself for Mason’s death was irrational. Eddie and I were both holding ourselves responsible for things that had been beyond our control. We were torturing ourselves with guilt we didn’t deserve.

“Hey, Lissa. Come here.”

The serious subject was put on hold as Jesse and Ralf waved at her from across the dorm’s lobby. My defenses immediately went up. So did hers. She didn’t like them any better than I did.

“What’s this about?” asked Eddie warily.

“I don’t know,” she muttered, walking over. “I hope it’s fast.”

Jesse gave her a dazzling smile, one that I had once found really hot. Now I saw it for the fake piece of crap it was. “How’s it going?” he asked.

“It’s going tired,” she replied. “I need to get to bed. What’s up?”

Jesse looked over at Eddie. “Would you give us a little privacy?” Eddie looked at Lissa. She nodded, and Eddie backed up enough to be out of earshot but still watch her. When he was gone, Jesse said, “We have an invitation for you.”

“To what, a party?”

“Kind of. It’s a group . . .” Ralf wasn’t so good with words, and Jesse took over again.

“More than a group. It’s only for elite people.” He gestured around. “You and me and Ralf . . . we’re not like a lot of other Moroi. We’re not even like a lot of other royals. We have concerns and issues that we need to take care of.” I thought it was funny that he’d include Ralf. Ralf’s royalty came from his mother, a Voda, so he didn’t even carry one of the royal names, even if he

technically had the blood.

"It sounds kind of . . . snobby," she said. "No offense. Thanks for the offer, though." That was Lissa. Always polite, even to creeps like these.

"You don't understand. We aren't just sitting around. We're working to get things done. We're—" he hesitated and then spoke more softly, "—working on ways to get our voices out there, to make people see our way no matter what."

Lissa gave an uncomfortable laugh. "Sounds like compulsion."

"So?"

I couldn't see her face, but I could feel her working hard to keep it as straight as possible. "Are you out of your mind? Compulsion's forbidden. It's wrong."

"Only to some people. And apparently not you since you're pretty good at it."

She stiffened. "Why would you think that?"

"Because someone—a couple people, actually—hinted at it." People? I tried to remember what Christian and I had said in the feeder room. We'd never mentioned her by name, though both of us had bragged about having seen someone use compulsion. And apparently, Jesse had noticed other things about her. "Besides, it's actually kind of obvious. People love you. You've gotten out of so much trouble, and I finally figured out why. You've been working people over this whole time. I was watching you in class the other day when you convinced Mr. Hill to let Christian work with you on that project. He never would have let anyone else do that."

I'd been with them in class that day. Lissa actually had used compulsion on her teacher to get help for Christian. She'd been so caught up in her pleas that she'd compelled Mr. Hill without even realizing it. Compared to other things I'd seen her do, it had actually been a pretty weak show of compulsion. No one had noticed. Well, almost no one.

"Look," Lissa said uneasily, "I seriously have no idea what you're talking about. I need to go to bed."

Jesse's face grew excited. "No, it's okay. We think it's cool. We want to help you—or actually, we want you to help us. I can't believe I never noticed it before. You're really good at it, and we need you to show us. Plus, none of the other Mână chapters has a Dragomir. We'd be the first to have every royal family represented."

She sighed. "If I could use compulsion, I'd make you guys go away. I told you, I'm not interested."

"But we need you!" exclaimed Ralf. Jesse shot him a sharp look and then turned his smile back on Lissa. I had this weird feeling he might actually be trying to compel her, but it had absolutely no effect on her—or me, since I was watching through her eyes.

"It's not just about you helping us. There are groups of Mână at every school," said Jesse. He was leaning close, and suddenly, he didn't look very friendly anymore. "Its members are all over the world. Be a part of it, and you'll have the connections to do whatever you want with your life. And if we can all learn to work compulsion, we can stop the Moroi government from doing stupid things—we can make sure the queen and everyone else make the right decision. Everything about this is good for you!"

"I'm doing fine on my own, thanks," she said, stepping back. "And I'm not really sure you know what's best for the Moroi."

"Fine? With your Strigoi boyfriend and slutty wannabe guardian?" exclaimed Ralf. He spoke loudly enough to get Eddie's attention, and Eddie did not look happy.

"Be quiet," Jesse told him angrily. He turned to Lissa. "He shouldn't have said that . . . but he's kind of right. Your family's reputation is all on you, and the way you're going, no one's taking you seriously. The queen's already trying to keep you in line and get you away from Ozera. You're going to crash and burn."

Lissa was growing angrier and angrier. "You have no idea what you're talking about. And—" She frowned. "What do you mean she's trying to get me away from Christian?"

"She wants to marr—" Ralf started to speak, but Jesse immediately cut him off.

"That's exactly what I'm talking about," said Jesse. "We know all sorts of things that could affect you and help you—you *and* Christian."

I had a feeling that Ralf had been about to mention the queen's plans to marry Lissa off to Adrian. I was puzzling out how he would know about that until I recalled again that Ralf was related to the Vodas. Priscilla Voda was the queen's adviser and best friend. She knew all of the queen's plans and had probably told Ralf. His relationship to her must have been closer than I'd realized.

"Tell me," Lissa demanded. The thought of using compulsion on him actually crossed her mind, but she dismissed it. She wouldn't lower herself to that. "What do you know about Christian?"

"No free information," said Jesse. "Come to a meeting and we'll tell you everything."

"Whatever. I'm not interested in your elitist connections, and I don't know anything about compulsion." Despite her words, she was insanely curious about what he knew.

She started to turn away, but Jesse grabbed her arm. "Damn it! You have to —"

"Lissa's going to bed now," said Eddie. He'd shot over as soon as Jesse touched her. "Remove your hand, or I'll do it for you."

Jesse glared at Eddie. Like most Moroi-dhampir matchups, Jesse had height, and Eddie had muscle. Of course, Jesse had Ralf's bulk too, but it wouldn't matter. Everyone there knew who would win if Eddie went up against them. The beauty of it was that Eddie probably wouldn't even get in trouble if he claimed he'd done it to save Lissa from harassment.

Jesse and Ralf slowly backed off. "We need you," said Jesse. "You're the only one. Think about it."

When they were gone, Eddie asked, "Are you okay?"

"Yeah . . . thanks. God, that was so weird." They moved toward the stairs.

"What was it about?"

"They're obsessed with this royal society or something and want me to join so they can have every royal family in it. They were kind of fanatic about it." Eddie knew about spirit, but she wasn't comfortable reminding him what a

badass she was with compulsion.

He opened the door for her. “Well, they can annoy you all they want, but they can’t make you join something you don’t want to.”

“Yeah, I suppose.” Part of her still wondered what they knew about Christian or if it had been a bluff. “I just hope they don’t get too annoying.”

“Don’t worry,” he told her, his voice hard. “I’ll make sure they don’t.”

I slipped back to my body and opened the door to my own dorm. Halfway up the stairs, I discovered I was smiling. I certainly didn’t want Jesse and Ralf bothering Lissa, but if it came down to Eddie having to rough them up? Yeah. I wouldn’t mind seeing them get a little payback for what they’d done to others.

TWENTY-TWO

DEIDRE THE COUNSELOR must not have had much of a life, because she scheduled our next appointment on a Sunday. I wasn't thrilled about it, seeing as it wasn't just my day off—it was also the day my friends had off. Orders were orders, however, so I grudgingly showed up.

"You're wrong," I told her as soon as I sat down. We hadn't really addressed the questions from my first session yet. We'd spent our last couple of times talking about my mother and what I thought of the field experience.

"What about?" she asked. She wore a sleeveless floral dress that seemed too cold for a day like today. It also bore an eerie resemblance to the nature photographs that hung around the office.

"About the guy. I don't just like him because I can't have him. I like him because . . . well, because he's *him*. I've proven it to myself."

"Proven it how?"

"It's a long story," I said evasively. I didn't really want to get into the details of my Adrian compulsion experiment. "You just have to trust me."

"What about the other thing we talked about?" she asked. "What about your feelings about Lissa?"

"That idea was wrong too."

"Did you prove it to yourself?"

"No, but it wasn't the kind of thing I could really test the same way."

"Then how can you be sure?" she asked.

"Because I am." That was the best answer she was going to get.

"How have things been with her recently?"

"Recently how?"

"Have you spent a lot of time together? Kept up with what she's been doing?"

“Sure, kind of. I don’t see her as much. She’s doing the same things as usual though. Hanging out with Christian. Acing every test. Oh, and she’s practically got Lehigh’s web-site memorized.”

“Lehigh?”

I explained the queen’s offer to Deirdre. “She won’t even be there until fall, but Lissa’s already looking at all her classes and trying to figure out what she wants to major in.”

“What about you?”

“What about me?”

“What will you do while she attends classes?”

“I’ll go with her. That’s what usually happens if a Moroi has a guardian close to her age. They’ll probably enroll me too.”

“You’ll take the same classes she does?”

“Yup.”

“Are there classes you’d rather take instead?”

“How do I know? She hasn’t even picked the ones she’s going to take, so I don’t know if I want to take them or not. But it doesn’t matter. I have to go with her.”

“And you don’t have a problem with that?”

My temper was starting to prickle. This was exactly what I hadn’t wanted to talk about. “No,” I said tightly.

I knew Deirdre wanted me to elaborate, but I refused to. We held each other’s eyes for a few moments, almost like we were challenging the other to look away. Or maybe I was reading too much into it. She glanced down at the mysterious notepad she always held and flipped through a couple of pages. I noticed that her nails were perfectly shaped and painted red. The polish on mine had started to chip.

“Would you rather not talk about Lissa today?” she asked at last.

“We can talk about whatever you think is useful.”

“What do *you* think is useful?”

Damn it. She was doing the question thing again. I wondered if one of the certificates on her wall gave her some sort of special qualification to do that.

“I think it’d be useful if you stopped talking to me like I’m a Moroi. You act like I have choices—like I have the right to be upset about any of this or pick what classes I want to take. I mean, let’s say I could choose them. What good would it do? What am I going to do with those classes? Go be a lawyer or a marine biologist? There’s no point in me having my own schedule. Everything’s already decided for me.”

“And you’re okay with that.” It could have been a question, but she said it like a statement of fact.

I shrugged. “I’m okay with keeping her safe, and that’s what you keep missing here. Every job has bad parts. Do I want to sit through her calculus classes? No. But I have to because the other part is more important. Do you want to listen to angry teenagers try to block your efforts? No. But you have to because the rest of your job is more important.”

“Actually,” she said unexpectedly, “that’s my favorite part of the job.”

I couldn’t tell if she was joking or not, but I decided not to pursue it, particularly since she hadn’t responded with a question. I sighed.

"I just hate everyone acting like I'm being forced to be a guardian."

"Who's 'everyone'?"

"Well, you and this guy I met at Court . . . this dhampir named Ambrose. He's . . . well, he's a blood whore. A guy blood whore." Like that wasn't obvious. I waited to see if she'd react to the term, but she didn't. "He made it sound like I was trapped in this life and all that too. But I'm not. This is what I want. I'm good at this. I know how to fight, and I know how to defend others. Have you ever seen a Strigoi?"

She shook her head.

"Well, I have. And when I say I want to spend my life protecting Moroi and killing Strigoi, I mean it. Strigoi are evil and need to be wiped out. I'm happy to do that, and if I get to be with my best friend in the process, that's even better."

"I understand that, but what happens if you want other things—things that you can't have by choosing this lifestyle?"

I crossed my arms. "Same answer as before. There are good and bad sides to everything. We just have to balance them as best we can. I mean, are you going to try to tell me that life isn't that way? That if I can't have everything perfect, then there's something wrong with me?"

"No, of course not," she said, tilting back in her chair. "I want you to have a wonderful life, but I can't expect a perfect one. No one can. But what I think is interesting here is how you respond and cope when you have to reconcile these contradictory pieces of your life—when having one thing means you can't have another."

"Everyone goes through that." I felt like I was repeating myself.

"Yes, but not everyone sees ghosts as a result of it."

It took several heavy seconds for me to finally realize what she was getting at. "So wait. You're saying that the reason I'm seeing Mason is because I secretly resent Lissa for the things I can't have in my life? What happened to all the trauma I've been through? I thought that was the reason I'm seeing Mason?"

"I think there are a lot of reasons you're seeing Mason," she said. "And that's what we're exploring."

"And yet," I said, "we never actually talk about Mason."

Deirdre smiled serenely. "Don't we?"

Our session ended.

"Does she always answer your questions with questions?" I asked Lissa later. I was walking with her through the quad, heading toward the commons for dinner. Afterward, we were going to meet up with the others for a movie. It had been a while since she and I had hung out just by ourselves, and I realized now how much I'd missed it.

"We don't see the same counselor," she laughed. "It'd be a conflict of interest."

"Well, does yours do that then?"

"Not that I've really noticed. I take it yours does?"

"Yeah . . . it's actually pretty amazing to watch."

"Who knew the day would come when we'd be comparing notes on therapy?"

We both laughed at that. Several moments passed, and then she started to say something. She wanted to tell me about what had happened with Jesse and Ralf, not realizing I already knew. Before she could say anything, though, someone joined us. Dean Barnes.

"Hey, Rose. A bunch of us are trying to figure out why you're on half-time."

Great. I'd known somebody would ask about that sooner or later. And honestly, I was kind of surprised it hadn't happened already. Everyone had been too busy with their own field experiences to give it much thought until now. I had an excuse ready.

"I've been sick. Dr. Olendzki didn't want me going full-time."

"Really?" he asked, staggering a little. "I thought they were always talking about how in the real world, you don't get sick days. Or something like that."

"Well, this isn't the real world, and Dr. Olendzki's word is final."

"I heard it was because you're a threat to Christian."

"No, believe me, that's not it." The scent of alcohol radiating off of him gave me a convenient way to change the subject. "Have you been drinking?"

"Yeah, Shane got some stuff and had a few of us up in his room. Hey."

"Hey what?" I asked.

"Don't look at me like that."

"Like what?"

"Like you disapprove."

"I'm not," I argued.

Lissa giggled. "You are, actually."

Dean put on an offended face. "Hey, it's my day off, and even if it *is* Sunday, that doesn't mean I can't—"

Something moved beside us.

I didn't even hesitate. It was too fast, too covert to be anything friendly. And it was wearing all black. I threw myself between it and Lissa and lashed out at my attacker. In the flurry of activity, I vaguely recognized a guardian who generally taught the elementary novices. Her name was Jane or Joan or something like that. Jean, that was it. She was taller than me, but my fist made contact with her face anyway. She staggered back, and then I noticed another shape coming up beside her. Yuri. I leapt over so that she was between him and me. I kicked her in the stomach. She fell toward him, and both stumbled. In that brief moment, I had my practice stake out and aimed for her heart. I hit the mark, and she immediately stepped aside since she was now technically "dead."

Yuri and I then faced off. Beyond me, I heard a muffled sound that I suspected was Dean fighting his own attacker or attackers. I didn't have time to check yet. I needed to dispatch Yuri, which was harder since he was stronger than Jean. He and I circled, both feinting and landing blows. Finally, he made his major move, but I was faster and wiggled out of his grip. I stayed out of his reach just long enough to stake him too.

As soon as he backed away in defeat, I turned toward Dean. Lissa stood off to the side, watching as Dean sparred with his attacker. It was pathetic, to say the least. I'd given Ryan a hard time, but his mistakes were nothing compared to this. Dean's practice stake was on the ground, and his moves were jerky and unsteady. I decided then that he was more of a liability if he stayed in the

fight. I threw myself forward and shoved him out of the way, off toward Lissa. I think I might have pushed hard enough to make him fall, but I didn't care. I needed him out of the way.

Facing my opponent, I saw: Dimitri.

It was unexpected. Some little voice in the back of my head said I couldn't fight Dimitri. The rest of me reminded that voice that I'd been doing it for the last six months, and besides, he wasn't Dimitri right now. He was my enemy.

I sprang toward him with the stake, hoping to catch him by surprise. But Dimitri was hard to catch by surprise. And he was fast. Oh, so fast. It was like he knew what I was going to do before I did it. He halted my attack with a glancing blow to the side of the head. I knew it would hurt later, but my adrenaline was running too strong for me to pay attention to it now.

Distantly, I realized some other people had come to watch us. Dimitri and I were celebrities in different ways around here, and our mentoring relationship added to the drama. This was prime-time entertainment.

My eyes were only on Dimitri, though. As we tested each other, attacking and blocking, I tried to remember everything he'd taught me. I also tried to remember everything I knew about him. I'd practiced with him for months. I knew him, knew his moves, just as he knew mine. I could anticipate him the same way. Once I started using that knowledge, the fight grew tricky. We were too well matched, both of us too fast. My heart thumped in my chest, and sweat coated my skin.

Then Dimitri finally got through. He moved in for an attack, coming at me with the full force of his body. I blocked the worst of it, but he was so strong that I was the one who stumbled from the impact. He didn't waste the opportunity and dragged me to the ground, trying to pin me. Being trapped like that by a Strigoi would likely result in the neck being bitten or broken. I couldn't let that happen.

So, although he held most of me to the ground, I managed to shove my elbow up and nail him in the face. He flinched, and that was all I needed. I rolled him over and held him down. He fought to push me off, and I pushed right back while also trying to maneuver my stake. He was so strong, though. I was certain I wouldn't be able to hold him. Then, just as I thought I'd lose my hold, I got a good grip on the stake. And like that, the stake came down over his heart. It was done.

Behind me, people were clapping, but all I noticed was Dimitri. Our gazes were locked. I was still straddling him, my hands pressed against his chest. Both of us were sweaty and breathing heavily. His eyes looked at me with pride—and a hell of a lot more. He was so close, and my whole body yearned for him, again thinking he was a piece of me I needed in order to be complete. The air between us seemed warm and heady, and I would have given anything in that moment to lie down with him and have his arms wrap around me. His expression showed me that he was thinking the same thing. The fight was finished, but remnants of the adrenaline and animal intensity remained.

Then a hand reached down, and Jean helped me stand up. She and Yuri were beaming, as were the spectators who had wandered up. Even Lissa looked impressed. Dean, understandably, looked miserable. I hoped word of my stunning victory would spread around campus as fast as the recent bad

stuff about me had. Probably not.

"Well done," said Yuri. "You took down all three of us. That was textbook perfect."

Dimitri was on his feet now too. I looked pointedly at the other two guardians because I was pretty sure if I looked at him, my expression would give everything away. My breathing was still heavy. "I hope . . . I hope I didn't hurt any of you," I said.

This made all of them laugh. "That's our job," said Jean. "Don't worry about us. We're tough." She glanced at Dimitri. "She got you pretty good with her elbow."

Dimitri rubbed his face near his eye, and I hoped I hadn't caused too much damage. "The student surpasses the teacher," he joked. "Or stakes, rather."

Yuri was giving Dean a hard look. "Alcohol isn't allowed on campus."

"It's Sunday!" he exclaimed. "We aren't supposed to be on duty."

"There are no rules in the real world," said Jean in a very teacherlike way. "Consider this a pop quiz. You passed it, Rose. Very nice job."

"Thanks. Wish I could say the same for my clothes." I was wet and muddy. "I'm going to have to go change, Liss. I'll meet you for dinner."

"Okay." Her face was alight. She was so proud of me, she could barely contain it. I could also sense her keeping something secret, and I wondered if there would be a congratulations surprise when I saw her later. I didn't probe too deeply, lest I ruin it.

"And you," said Yuri, tugging at Dean's sleeve, "are going to take a walk with us."

I met Dimitri's eyes. I wished he could have stuck around and talked. My adrenaline was running high, and I wanted to celebrate. I'd done it. Finally. After all the embarrassment over my fumbles and alleged incompetence, I'd finally proven what I could do. I wanted to start dancing. Dimitri had to go with the others, though, and only a slight nod of his head told me he wished it were otherwise. I sighed and watched them leave, and then I walked back to my dorm alone.

Back in my room, I discovered the situation was worse than I thought. Once I'd stripped off my muddy clothes, I realized I was going to need a shower and a good scrubbing before I was presentable. By the time it was all done, nearly an hour had passed. I'd missed most of dinner.

I ran back over to the commons, wondering why Lissa hadn't sent me any nagging thoughts. She had a tendency to do that when I was running late. Probably she'd decided I'd deserved a break after my triumph. Thinking about it again, a big grin crept over my face, one that dried up when I headed down the hallway that led to the cafeteria.

A big group of people had gathered around something, and I recognized the international sign of a fight. Considering how Jesse's band liked to conduct their beatings in secret, I figured this probably had nothing to do with them. Squeezing through people, I pushed myself forward and peeked over some heads, curious as to who could have drawn such a crowd.

It was Adrian and Christian.

And Eddie. But Eddie was clearly there in a referee role. He was standing between them, trying to keep them away from each other. Manners gone, I

shoved aside the last few people in front of me and hurried to Eddie's side.

"What the hell's going on?" I demanded.

He looked relieved to see me. He might be able to fend off our instructors in combat, but this situation was clearly something he was confused about.

"No idea."

I looked at the two combatants. Fortunately, no one seemed to have hit anybody . . . yet. It also looked as though Christian was the one on the offensive.

"How long did you think you could get away with it?" he exclaimed. His eyes were like blue fire. "Did you seriously think everyone would keep buying your act?"

Adrian looked laconic as usual, but I could see some anxiety under that lazy smile. He didn't want to be in this situation, and, like Eddie, he wasn't even sure how it had happened.

"Honestly," said Adrian in a weary voice, "I have no idea what you're talking about. Can we please just go sit down and discuss this reasonably?"

"Sure. Of course you'd want that. You're afraid I might do this." Christian held up his hand, and a ball of flame danced over his palm. Even under the fluorescent lights, it glowed bright orange with a deep blue core. There were gasps from the crowd. I'd long since gotten used to the idea of Moroi fighting with magic—Christian in particular—but for most, it was still a taboo thing. Christian smirked. "What have you got to fight back with? Plants?"

"If you're going to go start fights for no reason, you should at least do it the old-fashioned way and throw a punch," said Adrian. His voice was light, but he was still uneasy. My guess was that he figured he could do better with hand-to-hand than spirit-to-fire.

"No," interrupted Eddie. "No one's going to set anyone on fire. No one's going to punch anybody. There's been some huge mistake."

"What is it?" I demanded. "What happened?"

"Your friend there thinks I'm planning to marry Lissa and carry her off into the sunset," said Adrian. He spoke to me, but his eyes never left Christian.

"Don't act like it's not true," growled Christian. "I know it is. It's been part of your plan—yours and the queen's. She's been backing you the whole time. Coming back here . . . the whole studying thing . . . it was a scam to get Lissa away from me and tied to your family instead."

"Do you have any idea how paranoid you sound?" asked Adrian. "My great-aunt has to manage the entire Moroi government! Do you think she really cares about who's dating who in high school—especially with the state of affairs lately? Look, I'm sorry about all the time I've spent with her . . . we'll find her and figure this out. I really wasn't trying to get between you. There's no conspiracy going on here."

"Yes, there is," said Christian. He glanced over at me with a scowl "Isn't there? Rose knows. Rose has known for a while about this. She even talked to the queen about it."

"That's ridiculous," said Adrian, surprised enough that he too shot me a quick glance. "Right?"

"Well . . ." I began, realizing this was getting very ugly very quickly. "Yes and no."

"See?" asked Christian triumphantly.

The fire flew from his hand, but Eddie and I jumped into motion at the same time. People screamed. Eddie grabbed Christian, forcing the fire to fly high. Meanwhile, I grabbed Adrian and slammed him to the floor. It was a lucky division of labor. I didn't want to think what would have happened if Eddie and I had gone for the same person.

"Glad you care," muttered Adrian, wincing as he lifted his head from the floor.

"Compel him," I murmured as I helped him up. "We need to sort this out without someone spontaneously combusting."

Eddie was trying to restrain Christian from leaping forward. I grabbed a hold of one arm to help. Adrian didn't look thrilled about coming any closer, but he obeyed me nonetheless. Christian tried to jerk free but couldn't fight both Eddie and me. Uneasily, probably afraid of his hair catching on fire, Adrian leaned over Christian and made eye contact.

"Christian, stop this. Let's talk."

Christian struggled a little against his restraints, but slowly, his face went slack and his eyes started to glaze over.

"Let's talk about this," repeated Adrian.

"Okay," said Christian.

There was a collective sigh of disappointment from the crowd. Adrian had used his compulsion smoothly enough that no one suspected. It had looked as though Christian had simply seen reason. As the crowd dispersed, Eddie and I released Christian enough to a lead him over to far corner where we could talk in private. As soon as Adrian broke the gaze, Christian's face filled with fury, and he tried to leap at Adrian. Eddie and I were already holding on. He didn't move.

"What did you just do?" exclaimed Christian. Several people down the hall glanced back, no doubt hoping there'd be a fight after all. I shushed loudly in his ear. He flinched. "Ow."

"Be quiet. Something's wrong here, and we need to figure it out before you do something stupid."

"What's wrong," Christian said, glaring at Adrian, "is that they're trying to break up Lissa and me, and *you* knew about it, Rose."

Adrian glanced at me. "Did you really?"

"Yeah, long story." I turned back to Christian. "Look, Adrian didn't have anything to do with this. Not intentionally. It was Tatiana's idea—and she hasn't even actually done anything yet. It's just her long-term plan—hers alone, not his."

"Then how did you know about it?" demanded Christian.

"Because she told me—she was afraid that *I* was moving in on Adrian."

"Really? Did you defend our love?" Adrian asked.

"Be quiet," I said. "What I want to know, Christian, is who told you?"

"Ralf," he said, looking uncertain for the first time.

"You should have known better than to listen to him," remarked Eddie, face darkening at the name.

"Except, for once, Ralf was actually telling the truth—aside from Adrian being in on it. Ralf's related to the queen's best friend," I explained.

“Wonderful,” said Christian. He seemed calm enough, so Eddie and I released him. “We’ve all been played.”

I looked around, suddenly taken aback by something. “Where’s Lissa? Why didn’t she stop all of this?”

Adrian raised an eyebrow at me. “You tell us. Where is she? She didn’t come to dinner.”

“I can’t. . . .” I frowned. I’d gotten so good at shielding myself when I needed to that long periods of time would go by without me feeling anything from her. This time, I sensed nothing because there was nothing coming from her. “I can’t feel her.”

Three sets of eyes stared at me.

“Is she asleep?” asked Eddie.

“I can tell when she’s asleep. . . . This is something different. . . .” Slowly, slowly, I gained a sense of where she was. She’d been blocking me out on purpose, trying to hide from me, but I’d found her as I always did. “There she is. She was—oh God!”

My scream rang down the hall, echoing Lissa’s own screams as, far away, pain shot through her.

TWENTY-THREE

OTHERS IN THE HALL stopped and stared. I felt like I had just been hit in the face. Only it hadn't been my face. It had been Lissa's. I shifted into her mind and became instantly aware of her surroundings and everything happening to her—like the next time rocks flew up from the ground and slammed into her cheeks. They were guided by a freshman I didn't know anything about, save that he was a Drozdov. The rocks hurt both of us, but I withheld my screaming this time and gritted my teeth as I shifted back to the hallway with my friends.

"Northwest side of campus, between that weird-shaped pond and the fence," I told them.

With that, I broke away from them and headed out the door, running as hard as I could toward the part of campus where they were holding Lissa. I couldn't see all of the people gathered there through her eyes, but I recognized a few. Jesse and Ralf were there. Brandon. Brett. The Drozdov guy. Some others. The rocks were still hitting her, still cutting into her face. She didn't scream or cry, though—she just kept telling them over and over to stop while two other guys held her between them.

Jesse, meanwhile, kept telling her to *make* them stop. I only half-listened to him through her mind. The reasons didn't matter, and I'd already figured it out. They were going to torture her until she agreed to join their group. They must have forced Brandon and the others in the same way.

A suffocating feeling suddenly overwhelmed me, and I stumbled, unable to breathe as water smothered my face. Fighting hard, I separated myself from Lissa. That was happening to her, not me. Someone was torturing her with water now, using it to cut off her air. Whoever it was took their time, alternately filling her face with water, then pulling it back, then repeating. She

gasped and sputtered, still asking them to stop when she could.

Jesse continued watching with calculating eyes. “Don’t ask them. Make them.”

I tried running harder, but I could only go so much faster. They were at one of the farthest points of campus’s boundaries. It was a lot of distance to cover, and with every agonizing step, I felt more of Lissa’s pain and grew angrier and angrier. What kind of a guardian could I ever be to her if I couldn’t even keep her safe here on campus?

An air user went next, and suddenly, it was like she was being tortured by Victor’s henchman all over again. Air was alternately taken from her, leaving her gasping, and then slammed back into her, crushing her face. It was agony, and it brought back all the memories of her capture, all the terror and horror she’d been trying to forget. The air user stopped, but it was too late. Something snapped inside of her.

When Ralf stepped up next to use fire, I was so close that I actually saw it flare up in his hand. But he didn’t see me.

None of them had been paying attention to their surroundings, and there’d been too much noise from their own spectacle to hear me. I slammed into Ralf before the fire could leave his hand, pulling him to the ground and punching his face in one skilled maneuver. A few of the others—including Jesse—ran to help him and tried to pry me away. At least, they tried until they realized who it was.

Those who saw my face immediately backed off. Those who didn’t quickly learned the hard way when I went after them. I’d taken out three fully trained guardians earlier today. A group of spoiled royal Moroi took hardly any effort. It was ironic, too—and a sign of how unwilling some Moroi were to lift a hand in their defense—that while this group had been so eager to use magic to torture Lissa, none of them had actually thought to use it against me.

Most of them scattered before I could even lay a hand on them, and I didn’t care enough to go after them. I just wanted them away from Lissa. Admittedly, I gave Ralf a few extra punches even after he’d gone down, since I held him responsible for this whole mess. I finally left him alone, lying on the ground and groaning, as I straightened up and looked for Jesse—the other culprit here. I quickly found him. He was the only one left.

I ran over to him and then skidded to a halt, confused. He was just standing there, staring into space, mouth hanging open. I looked at him, looked at where he was staring, and then looked back at him.

“Spiders,” Lissa said. Her voice made me jump. She stood off to the side with wet hair, bruised and cut, but otherwise okay. In the moonlight, her pale features made her look almost as ghostly as Mason. Her eyes never left Jesse as he spoke. “He thinks he’s seeing spiders. And that they’re crawling on him. What do you think? Should I have gone with snakes?”

I looked back at Jesse. The expression on his face sent chills down my spine. It was like he was locked in his own private nightmare. Scarier still was what I felt through the bond. Usually when Lissa used magic, it felt golden and warm and wonderful. This time, it was different. It was black and slimy and thick.

“I think you should stop,” I said. In the distance, I heard people running toward us. “It’s all over.”

“It was an initiation ritual,” she said. “Well, kind of. They asked me to join a couple of days ago, and I refused. But they bugged me again today and kept saying they knew something important about Christian and Adrian. It started to get to me, so . . . I finally told them I’d come to one of their sessions but that I didn’t know anything about compulsion. It was an act. I just wanted to know what they knew.” She tilted her head barely at all, but something must have happened to Jesse. His eyes widened further as he continued to silently scream. “Even though I hadn’t technically agreed yet, they put me through their initiation ritual. They wanted to know how much I could really do. It’s a way to test how strong people are in compulsion. Torture them until they can’t stand it, and then, in the heat of it all, people lash out and try to compel the attackers to stop. If the victim manages any sort of compulsion at all, that person’s in the group.” She regarded Jesse carefully. He seemed to be in his own world, and it was a very, very bad one. “I guess this makes me their president, huh?”

“Stop it,” I said. The feel of this twisted magic was making me nauseous. She and Adrian had mentioned something like this before, this idea of making people see things that weren’t there. They’d jokingly called it super compulsion—and it was horrible. “This isn’t how spirit is supposed to be used. This isn’t you. It’s wrong.”

She was breathing heavily, sweat breaking out along her brow. “I can’t let go of it,” she said.

“You can,” I said. I touched her arm. “Give it to me.”

She briefly turned from Jesse and looked at me, astonished, before fixing her gaze back on him.

“What? You can’t use magic.”

I focused hard on the bond, on her mind. I couldn’t take the magic exactly, but I could take the darkness it brought on. It was what I’d been doing for a while now, I realized. Every time I’d worried and wished she’d calm down and fight dark feelings, she had—because I was taking it all from her. I was absorbing it, just as Anna had done for St. Vladimir. It was what Adrian had seen when the darkness jumped from her aura to mine. And this—this abuse of spirit, using it to maliciously harm another and *not* for self-defense, was bringing the worst side effects of all in her. It was corrupting and wrong, and I couldn’t let her have it. All thoughts of my own madness or rage were completely irrelevant at this moment.

“No,” I agreed. “I can’t. But you can use me to let it go. Focus on me. Release it all. It’s wrong. You don’t want it.”

She stared at me again, eyes wide and desperate. Even without direct eye contact, she was still able to torture Jesse. I both saw and felt the fight she waged. He’d hurt her so much—she wanted him to pay. He had to. And yet, at the same time, she knew I was right. But it was hard. So hard for her to let go . . .

Suddenly, the burn of that black magic vanished from the bond, along with that sickening sensation. Something hit me like a blast of wind in the face, and I staggered backward. I shuddered as a weird sensation twisted my stomach. It was like sparks, like a coil of electricity burning within me. Then it too was gone. Jesse fell to his knees, free of the nightmare.

Lissa sank with visible relief. She was still scared and hurt over what had happened, but she was no longer consumed with that terrible, destructive rage that had driven her to punish Jesse. That urge within her had disappeared.

The only problem was, it was in *me* now.

I turned on Jesse, and it was like nothing else existed in the universe except him. He had tried to ruin me in the past. He'd tortured Lissa and hurt so many others. It was unacceptable. I lunged for him. His eyes had only a moment to widen with terror before my fist connected with his face. His head jerked back, and blood spurted from his nose. I heard Lissa scream for me to stop, but I couldn't. He had to pay for what he'd done to her. I grabbed him by the shoulders and threw him hard against the ground. He was yelling now too—begging—for me to stop. He shut up when I hit him again.

I felt Lissa's hands clawing at me, trying to pull me off, but she wasn't strong enough. I kept hitting him. There was no sign of the strategic, precise fighting I'd used earlier with him and his friends, or even against Dimitri. This was unfocused and primal. This was me being controlled by the madness I'd taken from Lissa.

Then another set of hands ripped me away. These hands were stronger, dhampir hands, backed by muscles earned through years of training. It was Eddie. I struggled against his hold. We were closely matched, but he outweighed me.

"Let me go!" I yelled.

To my complete and utter horror, Lissa was now kneeling at Jesse's side, studying him with concern. It made no sense. How could she do that? After what he'd done? I saw compassion on her face, and a moment later, the burn of her healing magic lit our bond as she took away some of the worst of his injuries.

"No!" I screamed, straining against Eddie's hold. "You can't!"

That was when the other guardians showed up, Dimitri and Celeste in the lead. Christian and Adrian were nowhere in sight; they probably couldn't have kept pace with the others.

Organized chaos followed. Those from the society who remained were gathered up and herded off for questioning. Lissa likewise was taken away, led off to get her injuries treated. A part of me that was buried in all that bloodthirsty emotion wanted to go after her, but something else had caught my attention: They were also removing Jesse for medical help. Eddie was still holding onto me, his grip never faltering despite my struggles and pleas. Most of the adults were too busy with the others to notice me, but they noticed when I started shouting again.

"You can't let him go! You can't let him go!"

"Rose, calm down," said Alberta, her voice mild. How could she not get what was going on? "It's over."

"It is *not* over! Not until I get my hands around his throat and choke the life out of him!"

Alberta and some of the others seemed to realize that something serious was happening now—but they didn't appear to think it had anything to do with Jesse. They were all giving me the Rose-is-crazy look I'd come to know so well in recent days.

“Get her out of here,” said Alberta. “Get her cleaned up and calmed down.” She didn’t give any more instructions than that, but somehow, it was understood that Dimitri would be the one to deal with me.

He came over and took me from Eddie. In the brief change of captors, I tried to break away, but Dimitri was too fast and too strong. He grabbed my arm and started pulling me away from the scene.

“We can make this easy or difficult,” said Dimitri as we walked through the woods. “There’s no way I’m letting you go to Jesse. Besides, he’s at the med clinic, so you’d never get near him. If you can accept that, I’ll release you. If you bolt, you know I’ll just restrain you again.”

I weighed my options. The need to make Jesse suffer was still pounding in my blood, but Dimitri was right. For now.

“Okay,” I said. He hesitated a moment, perhaps wondering if I was telling the truth, and then let go of my arm. When I didn’t run off, I felt him relax very, very slightly.

“Alberta told you to clean me up,” I said evenly. “So we’re going to the med clinic?”

Dimitri scoffed. “Nice try. I’m not letting you near him. We’ll get first aid somewhere else.”

He led me off at an angle from the attack location, toward an area still at the edge of campus. I quickly realized where he was going. It was a cabin. Back when there had been more guardians on campus, some had actually stayed at these little outposts, providing regular protection for the school’s boundaries. They’d long since been abandoned, but this one had been cleaned up when Christian’s aunt had visited. She’d preferred hanging out here than in the school’s guest housing where other Moroi regarded her as a potential Strigoi.

He opened the door. It was dark inside, but I could see well enough to watch him find matches and light a kerosene lantern. It didn’t provide a huge amount of light, but it was fine for our eyes. Glancing around, I saw that Tasha really had done a good job with the place. It was clean and almost cozy, the bed made up with a soft quilt and a couple of chairs pulled up to the fireplace. There was even some food—canned and packaged—in the kitchen off to the side of the room.

“Sit down,” said Dimitri, gesturing to the bed. I did, and in about a minute, he had a fire going to warm the place up. Once it was in full blaze, he grabbed a first aid kit and a bottle of water from the counter and walked back over to the bed, dragging a chair so he could sit opposite me.

“You have to let me go,” I begged. “Don’t you see? Don’t you see how Jesse has to pay? He tortured her! He did horrible things to her.”

Dimitri wet some gauze and dabbed it to the side of my forehead. It stung, so I apparently had a cut there. “He’ll be punished, believe me. And the others.”

“With what?” I asked bitterly. “Detention? This is as bad as Victor Dashkov. Nobody does *anything* around here! People commit crimes and get away with it. He needs to *hurt*. They all need to.”

Dimitri paused his cleaning, giving me a concerned look. “Rose, I know you’re upset, but you know we don’t punish people like that. It’s . . . savage.”

“Yeah? What’s wrong with that? I’d bet it’d stop them from doing it again.” I could barely sit there. Every part of my body trembled with fury. “They need to suffer for what they did! And *I* want to be the one to do it! I want to hurt them all. I want to kill them all.” I started to get up, suddenly feeling like I’d explode. His hands were on my shoulders in a flash, shoving me back down. The first aid was long forgotten. His expression was a mixture of both worry and fierceness as he held me down. I fought against him, and his fingers bit in tighter.

“Rose! Snap out of this!” He was yelling now too. “You don’t mean any of it. You’ve been stressed and under a lot of pressure—it’s making a terrible event that much worse.”

“Stop it!” I shouted back at him. “You’re doing it—just like you always do. You’re always so reasonable, no matter how awful things are. What happened to you wanting to kill Victor in prison, huh? Why was that okay, but not this?”

“Because that was an exaggeration. You know it was. But this . . . this is something different. There’s something wrong with you right now.”

“No, there’s something right with me.” I was sizing him up, hoping my words distracted him. If I was fast enough, maybe—just maybe—I could get past him. “I’m the only one who wants to do anything around here, and if that’s wrong, I’m sorry. You keep wanting me to be some impossible, good person, but I’m not! I’m not a saint like you.”

“Neither of us is a saint,” he said dryly. “Believe me, I don’t—”

I made my move, leaping out and shoving him away. It got him off me, but I didn’t get far. I’d barely gotten two feet from the bed when he seized me again and pinned me down, this time using the full weight of his body to keep me immobilized. Somehow, I knew I should have realized it was an impossible escape plan, but I couldn’t think straight.

“Let me go!” I yelled for the hundredth time tonight, trying to free my hands.

“No,” he said, voice hard and almost desperate. “Not until you break out of this. This isn’t you!”

There were hot tears in my eyes. “It is! Let me go!”

“It’s not. It isn’t you! *It isn’t you*.” There was agony in his voice.

“You’re wrong! It is—”

My words suddenly dropped off. *It isn’t you.* It was the same thing I’d said to Lissa when I watched, terrified, as she used her magic to torture Jesse. I’d stood there, unable to believe what she was doing. She hadn’t realized she’d lost control and was on the verge of becoming a monster. And now, looking into Dimtiri’s eyes, seeing his panic and love, I realized it was happening to me. I was the same as she’d been, so caught up, so blinded by irrational emotions that I didn’t even recognize my own actions. It was like I was being controlled by something else.

I tried to fight it off, to shake off the feelings burning through me. They were too strong. I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t let them go. They would take me over completely, just as they’d done to Anna and Ms. Karp.

“Rose,” said Dimitri. It was only my name, but it was so powerful, filled with so much. Dimitri had such absolute faith me, faith in my own strength and goodness. And he had strength too, a strength I could see he wasn’t afraid

to lend me if I needed it. Deirdre might have been onto something about me resenting Lissa, but she was completely off about Dimitri. What we had was love. We were like two halves of a whole, always ready to support the other. Neither of us was perfect, but that didn't matter. With him, I could defeat this rage that filled me. He believed I was stronger than it. And I was.

Slowly, slowly, I felt that darkness fade away. I stopped fighting him. My body trembled, but it was no longer with fury. It was fear. Dimitri immediately recognized the change and released his hold.

"Oh my God," I said, voice shaking.

His hand touched the side of my face, fingers light on my cheek. "Rose," he breathed. "Are you okay?"

I swallowed back more tears. "I . . . I think so. For now."

"It's over," he said. He was still touching me, this time brushing the hair from my face. "It's over. Everything's all right."

I shook my head. "No. It's not. You . . . you don't understand. It's true—everything I was worried about. About Anna? About me taking away spirit's craziness? It's happening, Dimitri. Lissa lost it out there with Jesse. She was out of control, but I stopped her because I sucked away her anger and put it into myself. And it's—it's horrible. It's like I'm, I don't know, a puppet. I can't control myself."

"You're strong," he said. "It won't happen again."

"No," I said. I could hear my voice cracking as I struggled to sit up. "It *will* happen again. I'm going to be like Anna. I'm going to get worse and worse. This time it was bloodlust and hate. I wanted to destroy them. I needed to destroy them. Next time? I don't know. Maybe it'll just be craziness, like Ms. Karp. Maybe I'm already crazy, and that's why I'm seeing Mason. Maybe it'll be depression like Lissa used to get. I'll keep falling and falling into that pit, and then I'll be like Anna and kill—"

"No," Dimitri interrupted gently. He moved his face toward mine, our foreheads nearly touching. "It won't happen to you. You're too strong. You'll fight it, just like you did this time."

"I only did because you were here." He wrapped his arms around me, and I buried my face in his chest. "I can't do it by myself," I whispered.

"You can," he said. There was a tremulous note in his voice. "You're strong—you're so, so strong. It's why I love you."

I squeezed my eyes shut. "You shouldn't. I'm going to become something terrible. I might already be something terrible." I thought back to past behaviors, the way I'd been snapping at everyone. The way I'd tried to scare Ryan and Camille.

Dimitri pulled away so that he could look me in the eyes. He cupped my face in his hands. "You aren't. You won't," he said. "I won't let you. No matter what, I won't let you."

Emotion filled my body again, but now it wasn't hate or rage or anything like that. It was warm and wonderful and made my heart ache—in a good way. I wrapped my arms around his neck, and our lips met. The kiss was pure love, sweet and blissful, with no despair or darkness. Steadily, though, the intensity of our kissing increased. It was still filled with love but became much more—something hungry and powerful. The electricity that had crackled

between us when I'd fought and held him down earlier returned, wrapping around us now.

It reminded me of the night we'd been under Victor's lust spell, both of us driven by inner forces we couldn't control. It was like we were starving or drowning, and only the other person could save us. I clung to him, one arm around his neck while my other hand gripped his back so hard that my nails practically dug in. He laid me back down on the bed. His hands wrapped around my waist, and then one of them slid down the back of my thigh and pulled it up so that it nearly wrapped around him.

At the same time, we both pulled back briefly, still oh so close. Everything in the world rested on that moment.

"We can't . . ." he told me.

"I know," I agreed.

Then his mouth was on mine again, and this time, I knew there would be no turning back. There were no walls this time. Our bodies wrapped together as he tried to get my coat off, then his shirt, then my shirt. . . . It really was a lot like when we'd fought out on the quad earlier—that same passion and heat. I think at the end of the day, the instincts that power fighting and sex aren't so different. They all come from an animal side of us.

Yet, as more and more clothes came off, it went beyond just animal passion. It was sweet and wonderful at the same time. When I looked into his eyes, I could see without a doubt that he loved me more than anyone else in the world, that I was his salvation, the same way that he was mine. I'd never expected my first time to be in a cabin in the woods, but I realized the place didn't matter. The person did. With someone you loved, you could be anywhere, and it would be incredible. Being in the most luxurious bed in the world wouldn't matter if you were with someone you didn't love.

And oh, I loved him. I loved him so much that it hurt. All of our clothes finally ended up in a pile on the floor, but the feel of his skin on mine was more than enough to keep me warm. I couldn't tell where my body ended and his began, and I decided then that was how I always wanted it to be. I didn't want us to ever be apart.

I wish I had the words to describe sex, but nothing I can say would really capture how amazing it was. I felt nervous, excited, and about a gazillion other things. Dimitri seemed so wise and skilled and infinitely patient—just like with our combat trainings. Following his lead seemed like a natural thing, but he was also more than willing to let me take control too. We were equals at last, and every touch held power, even the slightest brushing of his fingertips.

When it was over, I lay back against him. My body hurt . . . yet at the same time, it felt amazing, blissful and content. I wished I'd been doing this a long time ago, but I also knew it wouldn't have been right until exactly this moment.

I rested my head on Dimitri's chest, taking comfort in his warmth. He kissed my forehead and ran his fingers through my hair.

"I love you, Roza." He kissed me again. "I'll always be here for you. I'm not going to let anything happen to you."

The words were wonderful and dangerous. He shouldn't have said anything

like that to me. He shouldn't have been promising he'd protect *me*, not when he was supposed to dedicate his life to protecting Moroi like Lissa. I couldn't be first in his heart, just like he couldn't be first in mine. That was why I shouldn't have said what I said next—but I did anyway.

"And I won't let anything happen to you," I promised. "I love you." He kissed me again, swallowing off any other words I might have added.

We lay together for a while after that, wrapped in each other's arms, not saying much. I could have stayed that way forever, but finally, we knew we had to go. The others would eventually come looking for us to get my report, and if they found us like that, things would almost certainly get ugly.

So we got dressed, which wasn't easy since we kept stopping to kiss. Finally, reluctantly, we left the cabin. We held hands, knowing we could only do so for a few brief moments. Once we were closer to the heart of campus, we'd have to go back to business as usual. But for now, everything in the world was golden and wonderful. Every step I took was filled with joy, and the air around us seemed to hum.

Questions still spun in my mind, of course. What had just happened? Where had our so-called control gone? For now, I couldn't care. My body was still warm and wanting him and—I suddenly stopped. Another feeling—a very unwelcome one—was steadily creeping over me. It was strange, like faint and fleeting waves of nausea mingled with a prickling against my skin. Dimitri stopped immediately and gave me a puzzled look.

A pale, slightly luminescent form materialized in front of us. Mason. He looked the same as ever—or did he? The usual sadness was there, but I could see something else, something else I couldn't quite put my finger on. Panic? Frustration? I could have almost sworn it was fear, but honestly, what would a ghost have to be afraid of?

"What's wrong?" asked Dimitri.

"Do you see him?" I whispered.

Dimitri followed my gaze. "See who?"

"Mason."

Mason's troubled expression grew darker. I might not have been able to adequately identify it, but I knew it wasn't anything good. The nauseous feeling within me intensified, but somehow, I knew it had nothing to do with him.

"Rose . . . we should go back . . ." said Dimitri carefully. He still wasn't on board with me seeing ghosts.

But I didn't move. Mason's face was saying something else to me—or trying to. There was something here, something important that I needed to know. But he couldn't communicate it.

"What?" I asked. "What is it?

A look of frustration crossed his face. He pointed off behind me, then dropped his hand.

"Tell me," I said, my frustration mirroring his. Dimitri was looking back and forth between me and Mason, though Mason was probably only an empty space to him.

I was too fixated on Mason to worry what Dimitri might think. There was something here. Something big. Mason opened his mouth, wanting to speak as

in previous times but still unable to get the words out. Except, this time, after several agonizing seconds, he managed it. The words were nearly inaudible.

"They're . . . coming. . . ."

TWENTY-FOUR

THE WHOLE WORLD was still. At this time of night, there were no birds or anything, but it seemed quieter than usual. Even the wind had fallen silent. Mason looked at me pleadingly. The nausea and prickling increased.

Then, I knew.

"Dimitri," I said urgently, "there are Strig—"

Too late. Dimitri and I saw him at the same time, but Dimitri was closer. Pale face. Red eyes. The Strigoi swooped toward us, and I could almost imagine he was flying, just like vampire legends used to say. But Dimitri was just as fast and nearly as strong. He had his stake—a real one, not a practice one—in his hand and met the Strigoi's attack. I think the Strigoi had hoped for the element of surprise. They grappled, and for a moment they seemed suspended in time, neither gaining ground on the other. Then Dimitri's hand snaked out, plunging the stake into the Strigoi's heart. The red eyes widened in surprise, and the Strigoi's body crumpled to the ground.

Dimitri turned to me to make sure I was all right, and a thousand silent messages passed between us. He turned away and scanned the woods, peering into the darkness. My nausea had increased. I didn't understand why, but somehow I could sense the Strigoi around us. That was what was making me feel sick. Dimitri turned back to me, and there was a look I'd never seen in his eyes.

"Rose. Listen to me. Run. Run as fast and as hard as you can back to your dorm. Tell the guardians."

I nodded. There was no questioning here.

Reaching out, he gripped my upper arm, gaze locked on me to make sure I understood his next words. "Do not stop," he said. "No matter what you hear, no matter what you see, *do not stop*. Not until you've warned the others. Don't

stop unless you're directly confronted. Do you understand?"

I nodded again. He released his hold.

"Tell them *buria*."

I nodded again.

"*Run*."

I ran. I didn't look back. I didn't ask what he was going to do because I already knew. He was going to stop as many Strigoi as he could so that I could get help. And a moment later, I heard grunts and hits that told me he'd found another. For only a heartbeat, I let myself worry about him. If he died, I was certain I would too. But then I let it go. I couldn't just think about one person, not when hundreds of lives were depending on me. There were Strigoi at our school. It was impossible. It couldn't happen.

My feet hit the ground hard, splashing through the slush and mud. Around me, I thought I could hear voices and shapes—not the ghosts from the airport, but the monsters I'd been dreading for so long. But nothing stopped me. When Dimitri and I had first begun training together, he'd made me run laps every day. I'd complained, but he'd stated over and over again that it was essential. It would make me stronger, he had said. And, he'd added, a day could come when I couldn't fight and would have to flee. This was it.

The dhampir dorm appeared before me, about half its windows lit. It was near curfew; people were going to bed. I burst in through the doors, feeling like my heart was going to explode from the exertion. The first person I saw was Stan, and I nearly knocked him over. He caught my wrists to steady me.

"Rose, wh—"

"Strigoi," I gasped out. "There are Strigoi on campus."

He stared at me, and for the first time I'd ever seen, his mouth seriously dropped open. Then, he recovered himself, and I could immediately see what he was thinking. More ghost stories. "Rose, I don't know what you're—"

"I'm not crazy!" I screamed. Everyone in the dorm's lobby was staring at us. "They're out there! They're out there, and Dimitri is fighting them alone. You have to help him." What had Dimitri told me? What was that word? "*Buria*. He said to tell you *buria*."

And like that, Stan was gone.

I had never seen any drills for Strigoi attacks, yet the guardians must have conducted them. Things moved too fast for them not to have. Every guardian in the dorm, whether they'd been awake or not, was in the lobby in a matter of minutes. Calls were made. I stood in a semicircle with other novices, who watched our elders organize themselves with amazing efficiency. Glancing around, I realized something. There were no other seniors with me. Since it was Sunday night, all of them had returned to the field experience to protect their Moroi. It was oddly relieving. The Moroi dorms had an extra line of defense.

At least, the teenage Moroi did. The elementary campus did not. It had its normal guardian protection, as well as a lot of the same defenses our dorm did, like gratings on all the first-floor windows. Things like that wouldn't keep Strigoi out, but they would slow them down. No one had ever done too much more than that. There'd been no need, not with the wards.

Alberta had joined the group and was sending out parties throughout

campus. Some were sent to secure buildings. Some were hunting parties, specifically seeking out Strigoi and trying to figure out how many were around. As the guardians thinned out, I stepped forward.

"What should we do?" I asked.

Alberta turned to me. Her eyes swept over me and the others standing behind me, ages ranging from fourteen to just a little younger than me. Something flashed across her face. Sadness, I thought.

"You stay here in the dorm," she said. "No one can leave—the whole campus is under lockdown. Go up to the floors you live on. There are guardians there organizing you into groups. The Strigoi are less likely to get up there from the outside. If they get in on this floor . . ." She scanned around us, at the door and windows being monitored. She shook her head. "Well, we'll deal with that."

"I can help," I told her. "You know I can."

I could tell she was about to disagree, but then she changed her mind. To my surprise, she nodded. "Take them upstairs. Watch them."

I started to protest being a babysitter, but then she did something really astonishing. She reached inside her coat and handed me a silver stake. A real one.

"Go on," she said. "We need them out of the way here."

I started to turn away but then paused. "What does *buria* mean?"

"Storm," she said softly. "It's Russian for 'storm.'"

I led the other novices up the stairs, directing them to their floors. Most were terrified, which was perfectly understandable. A few of them—the older ones in particular—looked like I felt. They wanted to do something, anything to help. And I knew that even though they were a year from graduation, they were still deadly in their way. I pulled a couple of them aside.

"Keep them from panicking," I said in a low voice. "And stay on watch. If something happens to the older guardians, it'll be up to you."

Their faces were sober, and they nodded at my directions. They understood perfectly. There were some novices, like Dean, who didn't always grasp the seriousness of our lives. But most did. We grew up fast.

I went to the second floor because I figured that was where I'd be most useful. If any Strigoi got past the first floor, this was the next logical target. I showed my stake to the guardians on duty and told them what Alberta had said. They respected her wishes, but I could tell they didn't want me to be too involved. They directed me down a wing with one small window. Only someone my size or smaller could probably fit through, and I knew that particular section of the building was nearly impossible to climb up, due to its outside shape.

But, I patrolled it anyway, desperate to know what was going on. How many Strigoi were there? Where were they? I realized then that I had a good way of finding out. Still keeping an eye on my window as best I could, I cleared my mind and slipped into Lissa's head.

Lissa was with a group of other Moroi on an upper floor of her dorm too. The lockdown procedures were undoubtedly the same across campus. There was a bit more tension in this group than with mine, probably due to the fact that even while inexperienced, the novices with me right now had some idea

how to fight Strigoi. The Moroi had none, despite those adamant Moroi political groups wanting to instigate some sort of training sessions. The logistics of that were still being figured out.

Eddie was near Lissa. He looked so fierce and so strong—like he could single-handedly take on every Strigoi on campus. I was so glad that he among my classmates was assigned to her.

Since I was completely inside her mind now, I got the full force of her feelings. Jesse's torture session seemed meaningless now compared to a Strigoi attack. Unsurprisingly, she was terrified. But most of her fear wasn't for herself. It was for me and Christian.

"Rose is fine," a voice nearby said. Lissa glanced over at Adrian. He'd apparently been in the dorm rather than guest housing. He had on his usual lazy face, but I could see fear masked behind his green eyes. "She can take on any Strigoi. Besides, Christian told you she was with Belikov. She's probably safer than we are."

Lissa nodded, wanting desperately to believe that. "But Christian . . ."

Adrian, for all his bravado, suddenly looked away. He wouldn't meet her eyes or offer any conciliatory words. I didn't need to hear the explanation because I read it from Lissa's mind. She and Christian had wanted to meet alone and talk about what had happened to her in the woods. They'd been supposed to sneak out and meet at his "lair" in the chapel's attic. She hadn't been fast enough and had been caught by curfew just before the attack, meaning she remained in the dorm while Christian was still out there.

It was Eddie who offered the words of comfort. "If he's in the chapel, he's fine. He really is the safest of all of us." Strigoi couldn't enter holy ground.

"Unless they burn it down," said Lissa. "They used to do that."

"Four hundred years ago," said Adrian. "I think they've got easier pickings around here without needing to go all medieval."

Lissa flinched at the words *easier pickings*. She knew Eddie was right about the chapel, but she couldn't shake the thought that Christian might have been on his way back to the dorm and been caught in the middle. The worry was eating her up, and she felt helpless with no way to do or find out anything.

I returned to my own body, standing in the second floor hallway. Finally, I really and truly grasped what Dimitri had said about the importance of guarding someone who wasn't psychically linked to me. Don't get me wrong; I was still worried about Lissa. I worried more about her than any other Moroi on campus. The only way I wouldn't have been worried would have been if she were miles away, ringed in wards and guardians. But at least I knew she was as safe as she could be right now. That was something.

But Christian . . . I had no idea. I had no link to tell me his whereabouts or to even let me know if he was alive. This was what Dimitri had meant. It was an entirely different game when you didn't have a bond—and it was a scary one.

I stared at the window without seeing it. Christian was out there. He was *my* charge. And even if the field experience was hypothetical . . . well, it didn't change things. He was a Moroi. He might be in danger. I was the one who was supposed to guard him. They came first.

I took a deep breath and wrestled with the decision before me. I'd been

given orders, and guardians followed orders. With the dangers around us, following orders was what kept us organized and efficient. Playing rebel could sometimes get people killed. Mason had proven that in going after the Strigoi in Spokane.

But it wasn't like I was the only one who faced danger here. Everyone was at risk. There was no safety, not until all the Strigoi were gone from campus, and I had no clue how many there were. Guarding this window was busy work, meant to keep me out of the way. True, someone could invade the second floor, and I'd be useful then. And true, a Strigoi could try to get in through this window, but that was unlikely. It was too difficult, and, as Adrian had pointed out, they had easier ways to get prey.

But I could go through the window.

I knew it was wrong, even as I opened the window up. I was exposing myself here, but I had conflicting instincts. Obey orders. Protect Moroi.

I had to go make sure Christian was okay.

Chilly night air blew in. No sounds from outside revealed what was happening. I'd climbed out of my room's window a number of times and had some experience with it. The problem here was that the stone beneath the window was perfectly smooth. There was no handhold. There was a small ledge down by the first floor, but the distance to it was longer than my height, so I couldn't simply slide down. If I could get to that ledge, however, I could walk off to the corner of the building where some scalloped edging would let me climb down easily.

I stared at the ledge below. I was going to have to drop down to it. If I fell, I'd probably break my neck. Easy pickings for Strigoi, as Adrian would say. With a quick prayer to whoever was listening, I climbed out of the window, holding onto its sill with both hands and letting my body dangle as close to the lower ledge as I could. I still had two more feet between it and me. I counted to three and released my hold, dragging my hands along the wall as I dropped. My feet hit the ledge and I started to wobble, but my dhampir reflexes kicked in. I regained my balance and stood there, holding the wall. I'd made it. From this point, I easily moved to the corner and climbed down.

I hit the ground, barely noticing I'd skinned my hands. The quad around me was silent, though I thought I heard some screams in the distance. If I were a Strigoi, I wouldn't mess with this dorm. They'd get a fight here, and while most Strigoi could probably take out a group of novices at once, there were easier ways. Moroi were less likely to put up a real fight, and anyway, Strigoi preferred their blood to ours.

Still, I moved cautiously as I set out toward the chapel. I had the cover of darkness, but Strigoi could see in it even better than I could. I used trees as covers, looking every way I could, wishing I had eyes in the back of my head. Nothing, save more screams in the distance. I realized then that I didn't have that nauseous feeling from earlier. Somehow, that feeling was an indicator of nearby Strigoi. I didn't entirely trust it enough to walk off blindly, but it was reassuring to know I had some kind of early alarm system.

Halfway to the chapel, I saw someone move out from behind a tree. I spun around, stake in hand, and nearly struck Christian in the heart.

"God, what are you doing?" I hissed.

“Trying to get back to the dorm,” he said. “What’s going on? I heard screaming.”

“There are Strigoi on campus,” I said.

“What? How?”

“I don’t know. You have to go back to the chapel. It’s safe there.” I could see it; we could get there easily.

Christian was as reckless as me sometimes, and I almost expected a fight. He didn’t give me one. “Okay. Are you going with me?”

I started to say I would, and then I felt that nauseous feeling creep over me. “Get down!” I yelled. He dropped to the ground without hesitation.

Two Strigoi were on us. They both moved in on me, knowing I’d be an easy target for their combined strength, and then they could go after Christian. One of them slammed me into a tree. My vision blurred for half a second, but I soon recovered. I shoved back and had the satisfaction of seeing her stagger a little. The other one—a man—reached for me, and I dodged him, slipping out of his grasp.

The pair of them reminded me of Isaiah and Elena from Spokane, but I refused to get caught up in memories. Both were taller than me, but the woman was closer to my height. I feinted toward him, and then struck out as fast as I could toward her. My stake bit into her heart. It surprised both of us. My first Strigoi staking.

I’d barely pulled the stake out when the other Strigoi backhanded me, snarling. I staggered but kept my balance as I sized him up. Taller. Stronger. Just like when I’d fought Dimitri. Probably faster too. We circled and then I leapt out and kicked him. He barely budged. He reached for me, and I again managed to dodge as I scanned for some opening to stake him. My narrow escape didn’t slow him down, though, and he immediately attacked again. He knocked me to the ground, pinning my arms. I tried to push him off, but he didn’t move. Saliva dripped from his fangs as he leaned his face down toward mine. This Strigoi wasn’t like Isaiah, wasting time with stupid speeches. This one was going to go in for the kill, draining my blood and then Christian’s. I felt the fangs against my neck and knew I was going to die. It was horrible. I wanted to live so, so badly . . . but this was how it would end. With my last moments, I started to yell at Christian to run, but then the Strigoi above me suddenly lit up like a torch. He jerked back, and I rolled out from underneath him.

Thick flames covered his body, completely obscuring any of his features. He was just a man-shaped bonfire. I heard a few strangled screams before he grew silent. He fell to the ground, twitching and rolling before finally going still. Steam rose from where fire hit the snow, and the flames soon burned out, revealing nothing but ashes underneath.

I stared at the charred remains. Only moments ago, I’d expected to die. Now my attacker was dead. I nearly reeled from how close I’d been to dying. Life and death were so unpredictable. So close to each other. We existed moment to moment, never knowing who would be the next to leave this world. I was still in it, barely, and as I looked up from the ashes, everything around me seemed so sweet and so beautiful. The trees. The stars. The moon. I was alive—and I was glad I was.

I turned to Christian, who was crouched on the ground.

"Wow," I said, helping him up. Obviously, he was the one who had saved me.

"No shit," he said. "Didn't know I had that much power." He peered around, body rigid and tense. "Are there more?"

"No," I said.

"You seem pretty certain."

"Well . . . this is going to sound weird, but I can kind of sense them. Don't ask how," I said, seeing his mouth open. "Just roll with it. I think it's like the ghost thing, a shadow-kissed side effect. Whatever. Let's get back to the chapel."

He didn't move. A strange, speculative look was on his face. "Rose . . . do you really want to hole up in the chapel?"

"What do you mean?"

"We just took out two Strigoi," he said, pointing to the staked and charred bodies.

I met his eyes, the full impact of what he was saying hitting me. I could sense Strigoi. He could use his fire on them. I could stake them. Provided we didn't hit a group of ten or something, we could do some serious damage. Then reality hit.

"I can't," I told him slowly. "I can't risk your life. . . ."

"Rose. You know what we could do. I can see it in your face. It's worth risking one Moroi life—and, well, yours—to take out a bunch of Strigoi."

Putting a Moroi in danger. Taking him out to fight Strigoi. It pretty much went against everything I'd been taught. All of a sudden, I remembered that brief moment of clarity I'd just had, the wonderful joy of being alive. I could save so many others. I had to save them. I would fight as hard as I could.

"Don't use your full power on them," I finally said. "You don't need to incinerate them in ten seconds like that. Just light them up enough to distract them, and then I'll finish them. You can save your power."

A grin lit his face. "We're going hunting?"

Oh man. I was going to get in so much trouble. But the idea was too appealing, too exciting. I wanted to fight back. I wanted to protect the people I loved. What I really wanted was to go to Lissa's dorm and protect her. That wasn't the most efficient idea, though. Lissa had my classmates on hand. Others weren't so lucky. I thought about those students, students like Jill.

"Let's go to the elementary campus," I said.

We set off at a light run, taking a route we hoped would keep us away from other Strigoi. I still had no idea how many we were dealing with here, and that was driving me crazy. When we were almost to the other campus, I felt the weird nausea hit me. I called a warning to Christian, just as a Strigoi grabbed him. But Christian was fast. Flames wreathed the Strigoi's head. He screamed and released Christian, trying frantically to put the flames out. The Strigoi never saw me coming with the stake. The whole thing took under a minute. Christian and I exchanged looks.

Yeah. We were badasses.

The elementary campus proved to be a center of activity. Strigoi and guardians were actively fighting around the entrances to one of the dorms. For

a moment, I froze. There were almost twenty Strigoi and half as many guardians. So many Strigoi together . . . Until recently, we'd never heard of them banding together in such large numbers. We'd thought we'd disbanded a large group of them by killing Isaiah, but apparently that wasn't true. I allowed myself only a moment more of shock, and then we jumped into the fray.

Emil was near a side entrance, fending off three Strigoi. He was battered and bruised, and the body of a fourth Strigoi lay at his feet. I lunged for one of the three. She didn't see me coming, and I managed to stake her with almost no resistance. I was lucky. Christian meanwhile set flames to the others. Emil's face reflected surprise, but that didn't stop him from staking another of the Strigoi. I got the other.

"You shouldn't have brought him here," Emil said as we moved to help another guardian. "Moroi aren't supposed to get involved with this."

"Moroi should have been involved with this a long time ago," said Christian through gritted teeth.

We spoke little after that. The rest was a blur. Christian and I moved from fight to fight, combining his magic and my stake. Not all of our kills were as fast and easy as our early ones had been. Some fights were long and drawn out. Emil stuck with us, and I honestly lost count of how many Strigoi we took down.

"I know you."

The words startled me. In all this bloodshed, none of us, friend or foe, did much talking. The speaker was a Strigoi who looked to be my own age but was probably at least ten times older. He had shoulder-length blond hair and eyes whose color I couldn't make out. They were ringed in red, which was all that mattered.

My only answer was to swing out with my stake, but he dodged that. Christian was setting a couple of other Strigoi on fire, so I was handling this one on my own.

"There's something strange about you now, but I still remember. I saw you years ago, before I was awakened." Okay, not ten times my age, not if he'd seen me when he was a Moroi. I hoped his talking would distract him. He was actually pretty fast for a young Strigoi. "You were always with that Dragomir girl, the blonde." My foot hit him, and I jerked my kick back before he could grab me. He barely budged. "Her parents wanted you to be her guardian, right? Before they were all killed?"

"I *am* her guardian," I grunted. My stake swiped dangerously close to him.

"She's still alive, then. . . . There were rumors that she'd died last year. . . ." There was a sense of wonder in his voice, which mixed weirdly with the malice. "You have no idea what kind of reward I'd get to take down the last living Drag—Ahh!"

He'd dodged my stake from hitting his chest again, but this time I managed an upward strike that dragged the stake's tip across his face. It wouldn't kill him there, but the touch of a stake—so filled with life—would feel like acid to the undead. He screamed, but it didn't slow his defenses.

"I'll come back for you after I finish her," he snarled.

"You'll never get near her," I growled back.

Something shoved into me from the side, a Strigoi that Yuri was fighting. I stumbled but managed to drive my stake through Yuri's Strigoi's heart before he could regain his balance. Yuri gasped his thanks, and then we both turned to other parts of the battle. Only the blond Strigoi was gone. I couldn't find him anywhere. Another took his place, and as I moved toward that one, flames lit up around him, making him an easy mark for my stake. Christian had returned.

"Christian, this Strigoi—"

"I heard," he panted.

"We have to go to her!"

"He was messing with you. She's across campus, surrounded by novices and guardians. She'll be okay."

"But—"

"They need us here."

I knew he was right—and I knew how hard it was for him to say that. Like me, he wanted to run off to Lissa. Despite all the good work he was doing here, I suspected he would rather have sunk all his magic into protecting her, keeping her ringed in a wall of fire no Strigoi could cross. I had no time to deeply investigate the bond, but I could sense the important things: She was alive, and she wasn't in pain.

So I stayed on, fighting with Christian and Yuri. Lissa hovered at the back of my mind, the bond telling me she was okay. Aside from that, I let battle lust consume me. I had one goal and one alone: Kill Strigoi. I couldn't let them get into this dorm, nor could I let them leave this area and possibly go to Lissa's dorm. I lost track of time. Only the Strigoi I was currently fighting at any given moment mattered. And as soon as that one was gone, it was on to the next.

Until there wasn't a next one.

I was sore and exhausted, adrenaline burning through my body. Christian stood beside me, panting. He hadn't engaged in physical combat like me, but he'd used a lot of magic tonight, and that had taken its own physical toll. I looked around.

"We gotta find another one," I said.

"There are no others," a familiar voice said.

I turned and looked into Dimitri's face. He was alive. All the fear for him I'd held back burst through me. I wanted to throw myself at him and hold him as close to me as possible. He was alive—battered and bloody, yes—but alive.

His gaze held mine for just a moment, reminding me of what had happened in the cabin. It felt like a hundred years ago, but in that brief glance, I saw love and concern—and relief. He'd been worried about me too. Then Dimitri turned and gestured to the eastern sky. I followed the motion. The horizon was pink and purple. It was nearly sunrise.

"They're either dead or have run away," he told me. He glanced between Christian and me. "What you two did—"

"Was stupid?" I suggested.

He shook his head. "One of the most amazing things I've ever seen. Half of those are yours."

I looked back at the dorm, shocked at the number of bodies lying around it.

We had killed Strigoi. We had killed a lot of them. Death and killing were horrible things . . . but I had liked doing what I just did. I had defeated the monsters who had come after me and those in my care.

Then I noticed something. My stomach twisted, but it was nothing like my earlier Strigoi-sensing feeling. This was caused by something entirely different. I turned back to Dimitri.

"There are more than just Strigoi bodies there," I said in a small voice.

"I know," he said. "We've lost a lot of people, in all senses of the word."

Christian frowned. "What do you mean?"

Dimitri's face was both hard and sad. "The Strigoi killed some Moroi and dhampirs. And some . . . some they carried away."

TWENTY-FIVE

DEAD OR TAKEN AWAY.

It wasn't enough that the Strigoi had come and attacked us, that they'd killed Moroi and dhampirs alike. They'd also carried some off. It was something Strigoi were known to do. Even they had limits on how much blood they could drink at once. So they'd often take prisoners to keep as snacks for later. Or sometimes a powerful Strigoi who didn't want to do the dirty work would send his or her minions off to bring back the prey. Every once in a while, they'd even purposely take back captives to turn into more Strigoi. Whatever the reason, it meant that some of our people might still be alive.

Students, Moroi and dhampir, were gathered up once certain buildings had been declared Strigoi-free. Adult Moroi were herded inside with us, leaving the guardians to assess the damage. I wanted desperately to be with them, to help and do my part, but they made it clear my part was over. There was nothing I could do at that point except wait and worry with the others. It still seemed unreal. Strigoi attacking our school. How could it have happened? The Academy was safe. We'd always been taught that. It had to be safe. It was why our school years were so long and why Moroi families endured being separated for most of the year. It was worth it for children to have a safe place to go.

That was no longer true.

It took only a couple hours for them to get a casualty count, but waiting while those reports trickled in felt like days. And the numbers . . . the numbers were harsh. Fifteen Moroi had been killed. Twelve guardians had been killed. A group of thirteen, both Moroi and dhampirs, had been taken away. The guardians estimated that there had been close to fifty Strigoi, which was beyond mind-boggling. They'd found twenty-eight Strigoi bodies. The rest

appeared to have escaped, many taking victims with them.

For that size of a Strigoi party, our casualty count was still lower than one might have expected. A few things were credited for saving us. One was the early warning. The Strigoi had barely penetrated the school's inner grounds when I'd warned Stan. The school had gone into lockdown quickly, and the fact that most everyone was already inside for curfew had helped. Most of the Moroi victims—dead or taken—were those who had been out in the open when the Strigoi came.

The Strigoi had never made it into the elementary dorms, which Dimitri said was largely thanks to me and Christian. They had managed to breach one of the Moroi dorms, however—the one that Lissa lived in. My stomach had dropped when I heard that. And even though I could feel that she was fine through the bond, all I could see was that smirking blond Strigoi, telling me he was going to finish the Dragomirs off. I didn't know what had happened to him; the attacking Strigoi group hadn't gotten far into her dorm, thankfully, but there had been casualties.

One of them was Eddie.

"*What*?" I exclaimed when Adrian told me.

We were eating in the cafeteria. I wasn't sure which meal it was since the campus had reverted to a daylight schedule that threw my sense of timing off. The cafeteria was nearly silent, all conversations in low whispers. Meals were the only reason students could leave their dorms. There was going to be a guardian meeting later on that I was actually invited to, but for now, I was confined with the rest of my friends.

"He was with you guys," I said. I focused on Lissa, almost accusingly. "I saw him with you. Through your eyes."

She looked up at me over the tray of food she had no interest in eating, her face pale and full of grief. "When the Strigoi got in downstairs, he and some other novices went down to help."

"They didn't find his body," said Adrian. There was no smirk on his face, no humor anywhere. "He was one of the ones they took."

Christian sighed and leaned back in his chair. "He's as good as dead, then."

The cafeteria disappeared. I stopped seeing any of them. All I could see in that moment was that room back in Spokane, that room where we'd been held. They'd tortured Eddie and nearly killed him. That experience had changed him forever, affecting the way he now conducted himself as a guardian. He'd grown extremely dedicated as a result, but it had cost him some of the light and laughter he used to have.

And now it was happening again. Eddie captured. He'd worked so hard to protect Lissa and others, risking his own life in the attack. I'd been nowhere near the Moroi dorm when it had happened, but I felt responsible—like I should have watched over him. Surely I owed it to Mason. Mason. Mason who had died on my watch and whose ghost I hadn't seen since he'd warned me earlier. I hadn't been able to save him, and now I'd lost his best friend too.

I shot up from my chair and shoved my tray away. That dark fury I'd been fighting blazed through me. If Strigoi had been around, I could have burned them up with it, without any need of Christian's magic.

"What's wrong?" asked Lissa.

I stared at her in disbelief. “What’s wrong? What’s *wrong*? Do you seriously have to ask that?” In the silent cafeteria, my voice rang out. People stared.

“Rose, you know what she means,” said Adrian, voice unusually calm. “We’re all upset. Sit back down. It’s going to be okay.”

For a moment, I almost listened to him. Then, I shook it off. He was trying to use compulsion to chill me out. I glared at him.

“It is not going to be okay—not unless we do something about this.”

“There’s nothing to be done,” said Christian. Beside him, Lissa was silent, still hurt from when I’d snapped at her.

“We’ll see about that,” I said.

“Rose, wait,” she called. She was worried about me—and scared, too. It was tiny and selfish, but she didn’t want me to leave her. She was used to me being there for her. I made her feel safe. But I couldn’t stay, not right now.

I stormed out of the commons and into the bright light outside. The guardians’ meeting wasn’t for another couple hours, but that didn’t matter. I needed to talk to someone now. I sprinted to the guardians’ building. Someone else was walking into it as I was, and I bumped her in my haste.

“Rose?”

My fury turned to surprise. “Mom?”

My famous guardian mother, Janine Hathaway, stood there by the door. She looked the same as she had when I’d seen her at New Year’s, her curly red hair still worn short and her face weathered from the sun. Her brown eyes seemed grimmer than last time, however, which was saying something.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

As I’d told Deirdre, my mother and I had had a troubled relationship for most of my life, largely because of the distance that inevitably came with having a parent who was a guardian. I’d resented her for years and we still weren’t super close, but she’d been there for me after Mason’s death, and I think we both tentatively hoped things might improve in coming years. She’d left after New Year’s, and last I’d heard, she’d gone back to Europe with the Szelsky she guarded.

She opened the door, and I followed her through. Her manner was brusque and businesslike, as always. “Replenishing the numbers. They’ve called in extras to reinforce campus.”

Replenishing the numbers. Replacing the guardians who had been killed. All the bodies had been cleared away—Strigoi, Moroi, and dhampir alike—but the hole left behind by those who were gone was apparent to all. I could still see them when I closed my eyes. But with her here, I realized I had an opportunity. I grabbed hold of her arm, which startled her.

“We have to go after them,” I said. “Rescue the ones who were taken.”

She regarded me carefully, a small frown the only sign of her feelings. “We don’t do that kind of thing. You know that. We have to protect those who are here.”

“What about those thirteen? Shouldn’t we protect them? And you went on a rescue mission once.”

She shook her head. “That was different. We had a trail. We wouldn’t know where to find this group if we wanted to.”

I knew she was right. The Strigoi wouldn’t have left an easy path to follow.

And yet . . . suddenly, I had an idea.

"They put the wards back up, right?" I asked.

"Yes, almost immediately. We're still not sure how they were broken. There were no stakes used to pierce them."

I started to tell her my theory about that, but she wasn't up to speed with my ghostly shenanigans. "Do you know where Dimitri is?"

She gestured toward groups of guardians hurrying all around. "I'm sure he's busy here somewhere. Everyone is. And now I need to go check in. I know you were invited to the meeting, but that's not for a while yet—you should stay out of the way."

"I will . . . but I need to see Dimitri first. It's important—it might play a role in what happens at the meeting."

"What is it?" she asked suspiciously.

"I can't explain yet. . . . It's complicated. It'd take too much time. Help me find him, and we'll tell you later."

My mother didn't seem happy about this. After all, Janine Hathaway wasn't someone people usually said no to. But she nonetheless helped me find Dimitri. After the events over winter break, I think she'd come to regard me as more than a hapless teenager. We found Dimitri with some other guardians, studying a map of campus and planning how to distribute the newly arrived guardians. There were enough people gathered around the map that he was able to slip away.

"What's going on?" he asked as he and I stood off to the side of the room. Even in the midst of this crisis, in the midst of worrying so much about others, I could tell that there was part of him that worried just about me. "Are you okay?"

"I think we should launch a rescue mission," I said.

"You know we—"

"—don't usually do that. Yeah, yeah. And I know we don't know where they are . . . except, I might."

He frowned. "How?"

I told him how it had been Mason who'd warned us last night. Dimitri and I had had no time to talk alone since then, so we'd never really debriefed on the events of the attack. We also hadn't really had a chance to talk about what had happened in the cabin. It made me feel weird because really, that was all I wanted to think about, but I couldn't. Not with so much else going on. So I kept trying to shove those memories of sex away, only to have them keep popping up and entangle my emotions further.

Hoping I seemed cool and competent, I continued explaining my ideas. "Mason's locked out now because the wards are back up, but somehow . . . I think he knows where the Strigoi are. I think he could show us where they are." Dimitri's face told me he had his doubts about this. "Come on! You have to believe me after what happened."

"I'm still having a hard time with that," he admitted. "But okay. Suppose this is true. You think he can just lead us? You can ask him and he'll do it?"

"Yeah," I said. "I think I can. I've been fighting him all this time, but I think if I actually try to work with him, he'll help. I think that's what he's always wanted. He knew the wards were weak and that the Strigoi had been lying in

wait. The Strigoi can't be too far away from us . . . they had to have stopped for daylight and hidden out somewhere. We might be able to get to them before the captives die. And once we get close enough, *I* can actually find them." I then explained the nauseous feeling I'd gotten when Strigoi were around. Dimitri didn't challenge this. I think too many weird things were going on for him to even question it.

"But Mason isn't here. You said he can't get through the wards. How will you get him to help us?" he asked.

I'd been thinking about this. "Take me to the front gates."

After a quick word to Alberta about "investigating something," Dimitri led me outside, and we walked the long way to the entrance to the school. Neither of us said anything as we walked. Even in the midst of all this, I still kept thinking of the cabin, of being in his arms. In some ways, it was part of what helped me cope with all the rest of this horror. I had a feeling it was on his mind too.

The entrance to the school consisted of a long stretch of iron fence that lay right on top of the wards. A road that wound from the main highway twenty miles away came up to the gate, which was almost always kept closed. Guardians had a small booth here, and the area was monitored at all times of the day.

They were surprised by our request, but Dimitri insisted it would just be for a moment. They slid the heavy gate open, revealing a space only big enough for one person to get through at a time. Dimitri and I stepped outside. A headache almost immediately built up behind my eyes, and I started to see faces and shapes. It was just like at the airport. When I was outside of wards, I could see all sorts of spirits. But I understood it now and no longer feared it. I needed to control it.

"Go away," I said to the gray, looming forms around me. "I don't have time for you. *Go*." I put as much force as I could into my will and my voice, and to my astonishment, the ghosts faded. A faint hum remained with me, reminding me they were still out there, and I knew if I let down my guard even a moment, it would all hit me again. Dimitri was eyeing me with concern.

"You're okay?"

I nodded and peered around. There was one ghost I wanted to see.

"Mason," I said. "I need you." Nothing. I summoned back up the command I'd used on the other ghosts just a moment ago. "*Mason*. Please. Come here."

I saw nothing except the road in front of us winding off into the winter-dead hills. Dimitri was giving me that look from last night, the one that said he was deeply concerned for my mental health. And actually, I was worried at that moment too. Last night's warning had been the final proof for me that Mason was real. But now . . .

A minute later, his shape materialized before me, looking a little paler than before. For the first time since all this had begun, I was happy to see him. He, of course, looked sad. Same old same old.

"Finally. You were making me look bad." He simply stared, and I immediately felt bad for joking. "I'm sorry. I need your help again. We have to find them. We have to save Eddie."

He nodded.

"Can you show me where they are?"

He nodded again and turned, pointing off in a direction that was almost directly behind me.

"They came in through the back of campus?"

He nodded yet again, and like that, I knew what had happened. I knew how the Strigoi had gotten in, but there was no time to dwell on that just now. I turned to Dimitri. "We need a map," I said.

He walked back through the gate and spoke a few words to one of the guardians on duty. A moment later, he returned with a map and unfolded it. It showed the layout of campus, as well as the surrounding roads and terrain. I took it from him and held it out to Mason, trying to keep it flat in the whipping wind.

The only true road out from the school was right in front of us. The rest of the campus was surrounded by forests and steep cliffs. I pointed to a spot at the back of the school's grounds. "This is where they came in, isn't it? Where the wards first broke?"

Mason nodded. He held out his finger and without touching the map, traced a route through the woods that flanked the edge of a small mountain. Following it long enough eventually led to a small dirt road that joined an interstate many miles away. I followed where he pointed and suddenly had my doubts about using him as a guide.

"No, that's not right," I said. "It can't be. This stretch of woods by the mountain has no roads. They'd have to go on foot, and it'd take too long to walk from the school to this other road. They wouldn't have had enough time. They'd be caught in daylight."

Mason shook his head—to disagree with me, apparently—and again traced the route back and forth. In particular, he kept pointing to a spot not far beyond the Academy's grounds. At least, it wasn't far away on the map. The map wasn't particularly detailed, and I guessed the spot was probably a few miles away. He held his finger there, looked at me, and then looked back down.

"They can't be there now," I argued. "It's outside. They might have come in through the back, but they had to have left through the front—gotten in some kind of vehicle and took off."

Mason shook his head.

I looked up at Dimitri, frustrated. I felt like the clock was ticking on us, and Mason's weird assertion that the Strigoi were a few miles away, outdoors in the daytime, was stirring up my irritable nature. I sincerely doubted they'd gotten out tents and were camping.

"Is there any building or anything out there?" I demanded, pointing at the spot Mason had indicated. "He says they were going out to that road. But they couldn't have walked there before the sun came up, and he claims they're there."

Dimitri's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "Not that I know of." He took the map from me and brought it to the other guardians to check with them. While they talked, I glanced back at Mason.

"You better be right about this," I warned him.

He nodded.

“Have you . . . have you seen them? The Strigoi and their captives?”

He nodded.

“Is Eddie still alive?”

He nodded, and Dimitri walked over.

“Rose . . .” There was a strange sound to Dimitri’s voice as he brought the map back, like he couldn’t entirely believe what he was saying. “Stephen says there are caves right at the base of the mountain here.”

I met Dimitri’s eyes, no doubt looking just as astonished as he did. “Are they big enough—”

“Big enough for the Strigoi to hide out in until nighttime?” Dimitri nodded. “They are. And they’re only five miles away.”

TWENTY-SIX

IT WAS ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE to believe. The Strigoi were practically right next door to us, waiting for nightfall so that they could finish their escape. Apparently, in the chaos of the attack, some of the Strigoi had obscured their tracks while others had made it look as though they might have exited through any number of points on campus. Caught up in our own aftermath, no one had given it much thought. The wards had been restored. As far as we were concerned, the Strigoi were gone, and that was what mattered.

Now we had an odd situation before us. Under normal circumstances—not that a massive Strigoi attack was normal—we would have never pursued them. Those kidnapped by Strigoi were usually written off as dead, and, as my mother had pointed out, guardians rarely knew where to look for Strigoi. This time, however, we knew. The Strigoi were essentially trapped. It presented an interesting dilemma.

Well, it wasn't a dilemma to me. I honestly couldn't figure out why we weren't in those caves right now, flushing out the Strigoi and looking for survivors. Dimitri and I hurried back, anxious to act on our news, but we had to wait until all the guardians gathered.

"Do *not* interrupt them," Dimitri told me as we were about to walk into the meeting that would decide our next course of action. We stood near the doorway, speaking in low voices. "I know how you feel. I know what you want to do. But ranting at them isn't going to help you get your way."

"Ranting?" I exclaimed, forgetting to speak softly.

"I see it," he said. "That fire's in you again—you want to tear somebody apart. It's what made you so deadly in the fight. But we're not fighting right now. The guardians have all the information. They'll make the right choice. You just have to be patient."

Part of what he said was true. In preparation for the meeting, we had relayed all our information and then done some more searching. Investigation had revealed that several years ago, one of the Moroi teachers had taught a geology class and mapped the caves out, providing us with everything we needed to know about them. The entrance was five miles from the Academy's back borders. The caves' longest chamber was about half a mile long, the far side letting out about twenty miles from the dirt road on the map. It had been believed that landslides had blocked both entrances. Now, we realized, clearing those out wouldn't be too difficult with Strigoi strength.

But I wasn't sure I trusted what Dimitri said about the guardians making the right choice. Minutes before the meeting began, I appealed to my mother.

"Please," I told her. "We have to do this."

She looked me over. "If there's a rescue, it's not going to be a 'we' thing. You aren't going."

"Why? Because our numbers were so badass the first time that no guardians died?" She flinched. "You *know* I can help. You know what I did. I'm a week away from my birthday and only a few months away from graduation. You think something magical's going to happen before then? I've got a few more things to learn, yeah, but I don't think that's big enough to stop me from helping. You guys need as much help as you can get, and there are plenty of other novices who are ready too. Bring Christian, and we'll be unstoppable."

"No," she said quickly. "Not him. You should have never gotten a Moroi involved, let alone one as young as him."

"But you saw what he could do."

She didn't argue that. I saw the indecision on her face. She glanced at the time and sighed. "Let me check something."

I didn't know where she went, but she was fifteen minutes late for the meeting. By then, Alberta had already debriefed the guardians on what we'd learned. Mercifully, she skipped the details about how we'd gotten our data, so we didn't have to waste time explaining the ghost part. The caves' layout was examined in detail. People asked questions. Then decision time came.

I braced myself. Fighting Strigoi had always meant relying on a defense strategy. We attacked only when attacked. Previous arguments for an offensive had always failed. I expected the same now.

Only it didn't come.

One by one, the guardians stood up and expressed their commitment to going on the rescue mission. As they did, I saw that fire Dimitri had spoken of. Everyone was ready for a fight. They wanted it. The Strigoi had gone too far. In our world, there were only a handful of places that were safe: the Royal Court and our academies. Children were sent to places like St. Vladimir's with the certainty they would be protected. That certainty had been shattered, and we wouldn't stand for that, especially if we could still save lives. An eager, victorious feeling burned in my chest.

"Well, then," said Alberta, glancing around. I think she was as surprised as I was, though she too had been in favor of a rescue. "We'll plan the logistics and head out. We've still got about nine hours of daylight to go after them before they leave."

"Wait," said my mother, standing up. All eyes turned to her, but she didn't

bat an eyelash under the scrutiny. She looked fierce and capable, and I was immensely proud of her. “I think there’s one other thing we should consider. I think we should allow some of the senior novices to go.”

This started a small outcry, but it only came from a minority. My mother gave an argument similar to what I had given her. She also maintained that novices would not be in the front lines but that we would serve more as backup should any Strigoi get through. The guardians had almost approved of this idea when she dropped another bomb on them.

“I think we should bring some Moroi with us.”

Celeste shot up. She had a huge gash on the side of her face. It made the bruise I’d seen on her the other day seem like a mosquito bite. “What? Are you insane?”

My mother fixed her with a calm look. “No. We all know what Rose and Christian Ozera did. One of our biggest problems with Strigoi is getting past their strength and speed to go in for the kill. If we bring fire-using Moroi, we have a distraction that will give us an edge. We can cut them down.”

A debate broke out. It took every ounce of self-control I had not to join in. I remembered Dimitri’s words about not interrupting. Yet as I listened, I couldn’t help my frustration. Every minute that passed was another minute we weren’t going after Eddie and the others. It was another minute in which someone might die.

I turned to where Dimitri sat beside me. “They’re being idiots,” I hissed.

His eyes were on Alberta, as she debated a guardian who usually worked the elementary campus. “No,” murmured Dimitri. “Watch. Change is happening before your eyes. People are going to remember this day as a turning point.”

And he was right. Once again, the guardians slowly signed on with the idea. I think it was part of that same initiative that made them want to fight in the first place. We had to get back at the Strigoi. This was more than our fight—it was the Moroi’s too. When my mother said she’d gotten a number of teachers to volunteer—they absolutely wouldn’t allow students for this—the decision was made. The guardians were going after the Strigoi, and novices and Moroi would go with them.

I felt triumphant and exultant. Dimitri was right. This was the moment our world would change.

But not for four hours.

“More guardians are coming,” Dimitri told me when I once again expressed my outrage.

“In four hours, the Strigoi could have decided to have a snack!”

“We need an overwhelming show of force,” he said. “We need every edge we can get. Yes, the Strigoi could kill a couple more before we get there. I don’t want that, believe me. But if we go in unprepared, we could lose more lives than that.”

My blood boiled. I knew he was right, and there was nothing I could do about it. I hated that. I hated being helpless.

“Come on,” he said, gesturing toward the exit. “Let’s take a walk.”

“Where?”

“It doesn’t matter. We just need to get you calmed down, or you’ll be in no

shape to fight."

"Yeah? Are you afraid of my possibly insane dark side coming out?"

"No, I'm afraid of your normal Rose Hathaway side coming out, the one that isn't afraid to jump in without thinking when she believes something is right."

I gave him a dry look. "Is there a difference?"

"Yes. The second one scares me."

I resisted the urge to elbow him. For half a heartbeat, I wished I could close my eyes and forget about all the hurt and bloodshed around us. I wanted to lounge in bed with him, laughing and teasing, with neither of us worried about anything else except each other. That wasn't real, though. This was.

"Won't they need you here?" I asked.

"No. Most of what they're doing now is waiting for the others, and they have more than enough people right now to help plan the attack. Your mother's leading that."

I followed his gaze to where my mom stood, in the center of a group of guardians, pointing with sharp, forceful motions toward what looked like maps. I still never quite knew what to think about her, but watching her now, I couldn't help but admire her dedication. There was none of the dysfunctional annoyance I usually experienced around her.

"Okay," I said. "Let's go."

He took me on a loop around campus, and we surveyed some of the aftermath. Most of the damage wasn't to the campus itself, of course. It was to our people. Still, we could see some signs of the attack: damage to buildings, bloodstains in unexpected places, etc. Most noticeable of all was the mood. Even in full daylight, there was a darkness around us, a heavy sorrow that you could almost reach out and feel. I saw it on the faces of everyone we passed.

I half-expected Dimitri to take me through where some of the injured were. He steered clear of that, however, and I could guess why. Lissa was helping out there, using her powers in small doses to heal the wounded. Adrian was as well, though he couldn't do nearly as much as her. They'd finally decided that it was worth risking everyone knowing about spirit. The tragedy here was too great. Besides, so much about spirit had gotten out at the trial that it had probably only been a matter of time anyway.

Dimitri didn't want me near Lissa while she was using her magic, which I found interesting. He still didn't know if I really was "catching" her madness, but he apparently didn't want to take any chances.

"You told me you had a theory about why the wards broke," he said. We'd extended our circuit of campus, not far from where Jesse's society had met last night.

I'd nearly forgotten. Once I'd pieced it together, the reason had been perfectly obvious. No one had really asked many questions about it, not yet. The immediate concerns had been to get new wards up and tend to our own people. The investigation would occur later.

"Jesse's group was doing their initiation right here by the wards. You know how stakes can negate wards because the elements go against each other? I think it's the same thing. Their initiation rites used all the elements, and I think they negated the wards in the same way."

"Magic is used all the time on campus, though," pointed out Dimitri. "In all

the elements. Why has this never happened before?"

"Because the magic isn't usually happening right on top of the wards. The wards are on the edges, so the two don't usually conflict. Also, I think it makes a difference in how the elements are being used. Magic is life, which is why it destroys Strigoi and why they can't cross it. The magic in stakes is used as a weapon. So was the magic in the torture session. When it's used in that sort of negative way, I think it cancels out good magic." I shivered, recalling that sickening feeling I'd felt when Lissa had used spirit to torment Jesse. It hadn't been natural.

Dimitri stared at a broken fence that marked one of the Academy's boundaries. "Incredible. I never would have thought that was possible, but it makes sense. The principle really is the same as for the stakes." He smiled at me. "You've thought about this a lot."

"I don't know. It just sort of fell together in my head." I glowered, thinking of Jesse's idiotic group. Bad enough they'd done what they did to Lissa. That was enough to make me want to go kick their asses (though not kill them anymore—I'd learned *some* restraint since last night). But this? Letting Strigoi into the school? How could something so stupid and petty on their part have led to this sort of disaster? It almost would have been better if they'd tried to make this happen, but no. It had come about through their glory-seeking game. "Idiots," I muttered.

The wind picked up. I shivered, and this time it was from the chilly temperature, not my own unease. Spring might be coming, but it certainly wasn't here yet.

"Let's get back inside," Dimitri said.

We turned around, and as we walked toward the heart of the secondary campus, I saw *it*. The cabin. Neither of us slowed down or obviously looked at it, but I knew he was just as acutely aware of it as I was. He proved it when he spoke a moment later.

"Rose, about what happened—"

I groaned. "I knew it. I *knew* this was going to happen."

He glanced over at me, startled. "That what was going to happen?"

"*This*. The part where you give me the huge lecture about how what we did was wrong and how we shouldn't have done it and how it's never going to happen again." Until the words left my mouth, I didn't realize how much I'd feared he would say that.

He still looked shocked. "Why would you think that?"

"Because that's how you are," I told him. I think I sounded a little hysterical. "You always want to do the right thing. And when you do the wrong thing, you then have to fix it and do the right thing. And I know you're going to say that what we did shouldn't have happened and that you wish—"

The rest of what I might have said was smothered as Dimitri wrapped his arm around my waist and pulled me to him in the shadow of a tree. Our lips met, and as we kissed, I forgot all about my worries and fears that he'd say what we'd done was a mistake. I even—as impossible as it seems—forgot about the death and destruction of the Strigoi. Just for a moment.

When we finally broke apart, he still kept me close to him. "I don't think what we did was wrong," he said softly. "I'm glad we did it. If we could go

back in time, I'd do it again."

A swirling feeling burned within my chest. "Really? What made you change your mind?"

"Because you're hard to resist," he said, clearly amused at my surprise. "And . . . do you remember what Rhonda said?"

There was another shock, hearing her brought up. But then I recalled his face when he'd listened to her and what he'd said about his grandmother. I tried to remember Rhonda's exact words.

"Something about how you're going to lose something. . . ." I apparently didn't remember it so well.

"'You will lose what you value most, so treasure it while you can.'"

Naturally, he knew it word for word. I'd scoffed at the words at the time, but now I tried to decipher them. At first, I felt a surge of joy: *I* was what he valued most. Then I gave him a startled look. "Wait. You think I'm going to die? That's why you slept with me?"

"No, no, of course not. I did what I did because . . . believe me, it wasn't because of that. Regardless of the specifics—or if it's even true—she was right about how easily things can change. We try to do what's right, or rather, what others say is right. But sometimes, when that goes against who we are . . . you have to choose. Even before the Strigoi attack, as I watched all the problems you were struggling with, I realized how much you meant to me. It changed everything. I was worried about you—so, so worried. You have no idea. And it became useless to try to act like I could ever put any Moroi life above yours. It's not going to happen, no matter how wrong others say it is. And so I decided that's something I have to deal with. Once I made that decision . . . there was nothing to hold us back." He hesitated, seeming to replay his words as he brushed my hair from my face. "Well, to hold *me* back. I'm speaking for myself. I don't mean to act like I know exactly why you did it."

"I did it because I love you," I said, like it was the most obvious thing in the world. And really, it was.

He laughed. "You can sum up in one sentence what it takes me a whole speech to get out."

"Because it's that simple. I love you, and I don't want to keep pretending like I don't."

"I don't either." His hand dropped from my face and found my hand. Fingers entwined, we began walking again. "I don't want any more lies."

"Then what'll happen now? With us, I mean. Once all of this is done . . . with the Strigoi . . ."

"Well, as much as I hate to reinforce your fears, you were right about one thing. We can't be together again—for the rest of the school year, that is. We're going to have to keep our distance."

I felt a little disappointed by this, but I knew with certainty he was right. We might finally have reached the point where we weren't going to deny our relationship anymore, but we could hardly flaunt it while I was still his student.

Our feet splashed through slush. A few scattered birds sang in the trees, undoubtedly surprised to see so much activity in daylight around here. Dimitri stared off into the sky ahead, face thoughtful. "After you graduate and are out

with Lissa . . .” He didn’t finish. It took me a moment, but I realized what he was about to say. My heart nearly stopped.

“You’re going to ask to be reassigned, aren’t you? You won’t be her guardian.”

“It’s the only way we can be together.”

“But we won’t actually be together,” I pointed out.

“Us staying with her gives us the same problem—me worrying more about you than her. She needs two guardians perfectly dedicated to *her*. If I can get assigned somewhere at Court, we’ll be near each other all the time. And in a secure place like that, there’s more flexibility with a guardian’s schedule.”

A whiny, selfish part of me wanted to immediately jump in with how much that sucked, but really, it didn’t. There was no option we had that was ideal. Each one came with hard choices. I knew it was hard for him to give up Lissa. He cared about her and wanted to keep her safe with a passion that almost rivaled my own. But he cared about me more, and he had to make that sacrifice if he still wanted to honor his sense of duty.

“Well,” I said, realizing something, “we might actually see more of each other if we’re guarding different people. We can get time off together. If we were both with Lissa, we’d be swapping shifts and always be apart.”

The trees were thinning up ahead, which was a shame, because I didn’t want to let go of his hand. Still, a surge of hope and joy began to blossom in my chest. It felt wrong in the wake of such tragedy, but I couldn’t help it.

After all this time, after all the heartache, Dimitri and I were going to make this work. There was always the possibility he could get assigned away from the Court, but even so, we’d still manage to get some time off together every once in a while. The time apart would be agony, but we would make it work. And it would be better than continuing to live a lie.

Yes, it was really going to happen. All of Deirdre’s worries about me coping with conflicting pieces of my life would be for nothing. I was going to have it all. Lissa and Dimitri. The thought that I could be with both of them was going to make me strong. It would carry me through this Strigoi attack. I’d tuck it away in the back of my mind, like a good luck charm.

Dimitri and I didn’t say anything else for a while. Like always, we didn’t have to. I knew he was feeling the same happy buzz I was, despite that stoic exterior. We were almost out of the forest, back in sight of the others, when he spoke again.

“You’ll be eighteen soon, but even so . . .” He sighed. “When this comes out, a lot of people aren’t going to be happy.”

“Yeah, well, they can deal.” Rumors and gossip I could handle.

“I also have a feeling your mother’s going to have a very ugly conversation with me.”

“You’re about to face down Strigoi, and my mother’s the one you’re scared of?”

I could see a smile playing at his lips. “She’s a force to be reckoned with. Where do you think you got it from?”

I laughed. “It’s a wonder you bother with me then.”

“You’re worth it, believe me.”

He kissed me again, using the last of the forest’s shadows for cover. In a

normal world, this would have been a happy, romantic walk the morning after sex. We wouldn't be preparing for battle and worrying about our loved ones. We'd be laughing and teasing each other while secretly planning our next romantic getaway.

We didn't live in a normal world, of course, but in this kiss, it was easy to imagine we did.

He and I reluctantly broke apart and left the woods, heading back toward the guardians' building. Dark times were ahead of us, but with his kiss still burning on my lips, I felt like I could do anything.

Even face down a pack of Strigoi.

TWENTY-SEVEN

NONE OF THE OTHERS appeared to have noticed our absence. More guardians, as promised, had shown up, and we now had almost fifty. It was a veritable army, and much as with the Strigoi, the numbers were unprecedented, aside from old European legends of great epic battles between our races. We had more guardians on campus, but some had to stay behind to protect the school. A lot of my classmates had been drafted for that duty, but about ten or so (including me) were accompanying the others to the cave.

An hour before departure, we met again to go over the plan. There was a large chamber near the far side of the cave, and it made the most sense for the Strigoi to be there so they could head out right away once night came. We were going to attack from both ends. Fifteen guardians would go in from each side, accompanied by three Moroi each. Ten guardians would remain at each entrance to hold back any escaping Strigoi. I was assigned to watch the entrance on the far side. Dimitri and my mother were part of the groups actually going inside. I wished desperately that I could have been with them, but I knew I was lucky to be along at all. And on a mission like this, every job was important.

Our little army set out, moving at a brisk pace to cover the five miles. We figured that it would take a little over an hour, and there would still be enough daylight for the fight and return trip. No Strigoi would be stationed outside on guard duty, so we could reach the caves undetected. Once our people were inside, however, it was almost a given that the Strigoi's superior hearing would immediately alert them to the attack.

There was little conversation as we approached. No one felt like chatting, and most talk was of a logistical nature. I walked with the novices, but every once in a while, I'd glance over and meet Dimitri's eyes. I felt like there was

an invisible bond between us now, so thick and intense that it was a wonder everyone couldn't see it. His face was battle-serious, but I saw the smile in his eyes.

Our group split when we reached the closest entrance to the cave. Dimitri and my mother were going in here, and as I gave them one last glance, my feelings had little to do with my earlier romantic interlude. Everything I felt was worry, worry I'd never see them again. I had to remind myself that they were tough—two of the best guardians out there. If anyone would come out of this, it was them. I was the one who needed to be careful, and as we walked the half-mile around the mountain's base, I carefully placed my emotions in a small compartment in the back of my mind. They'd have to stay there until this was over. I was in battle mode now and couldn't let my feelings distract me.

When we were almost to our entrance, I caught a silvery flash out of the corner of my eye. I'd been keeping the assorted ghostly images that lived outside of the wards away, but this was one I wanted to see. Glancing over, I saw Mason. He stood there, saying nothing, wearing his perpetually sad expression. He still seemed unusually pale to me. As our group passed by, he held up one hand, as a farewell or benediction, I didn't know.

At the cave's entrance, our group split up. Alberta and Stan were leading the group in. They stood poised at the entrance, waiting for the exact time they'd agreed upon with the other group. Ms. Carmack, my magic teacher, was among the Moroi going in with them. She looked nervous but determined.

The moment came, and the adults disappeared. The rest of us stood there, lined up in a ring around the cave. Gray clouds hung in the sky. The sun had begun its descent, but we still had awhile.

"This is going to be easy," murmured Meredith, one of three other girls in the senior class. She spoke uncertainly, more to herself than to me, I think. "A slam dunk. They'll take out the Strigoi before any of them realize it. We won't have to do anything."

I hoped she was right. I was ready to fight, but if I didn't have to, it'd mean everything had gone as planned.

We waited. There was nothing else to do. Every minute felt like an eternity. Then we heard it: the sounds of fighting. Muffled cries and grunts. A few screams. All of us tensed, bodies so rigid we nearly snapped. Emil was our leader on this, and he stood closest to entrance, stake in hand and sweat forming on his brow as he peered into the darkness, ready for any sign of a Strigoi.

A few minutes into it, we heard the sound of footsteps running toward us. Our stakes were ready. Emil and another guardian drew closer to the entrance, ready to jump in and kill the fleeing Strigoi.

But it wasn't a Strigoi who came out. It was Abby Badica. She was scraped up and dirty, but otherwise, she was alive. Her face was frantic and streaked with tears. At first, she screamed when she saw all of us. Then she realized who we were and collapsed into the arms of the first person she could get to—Meredith.

Meredith looked surprised, but she gave Abby a hug of reassurance. "It's okay," Meredith said. "Everything's okay. You're in the sun."

Gently, Meredith unwrapped Abby and led her to a nearby tree. Abby sat at its base, burying her face in her hands. Meredith returned to her position. I wanted to comfort Abby. I think we all did, but it would have to wait.

A minute later, another Moroi came out. It was Mr. Ellsworth, the teacher I'd had in fifth grade. He too looked worn, and his neck showed puncture marks. The Strigoi had used him for feeding but hadn't killed him yet. Nonetheless, despite what horrors he must have faced, Mr. Ellsworth was calm, his eyes alert and watchful. He recognized the situation and immediately stepped out of our circle.

"What's going on in there?" asked Emil, his eyes on the cave. Some of the guardians had earpieces, but I imagined in the midst of battle, it was hard to report back.

"It's a mess," said Mr. Ellsworth. "But we're getting away—in both directions. It's hard to tell who's fighting who, but the Strigoi are distracted. And someone . . ." He frowned. "I saw someone using fire on the Strigoi."

None of us answered. It was too complex to get into right now. He seemed to realize that and withdrew to sit near a still-sobbing Abby.

Two more Moroi and a dhampir I didn't know soon joined Abby and Mr. Ellsworth. Each time someone came out, I prayed that it would be Eddie. We had five victims so far, and I had to assume that others were escaping at the entrance closest to the school.

Several minutes passed, though, and no one else came out. My shirt was drenched, soaked through with sweat. I had to shift my hold on the stake every once in a while. My grip was so tight that my fingers were locking up. Suddenly, I saw Emil flinch. I realized he was getting a message through his earpiece. His face showed intense concentration, and then he murmured something back. Looking up at us, he pointed at three novices.

"You—take them back to the school." He gestured at the refugees, and then turned toward three of the adult guardians. "Go in. Most of the prisoners have gotten out, but our people are trapped. There's a stalemate." The guardians moved in without hesitation, and a few moments later, the novices and their charges took off.

That left four of us, two adults—Emil and Stephen—and two novices, me and Shane. The tension around us was so thick, we could barely breathe. No one else was coming out. No more reports were being made. Emil glanced up and looked alarmed. I followed his gaze. More time had passed than I realized. The sun was significantly lower. Emil suddenly flinched again as another message came through.

He looked at all of us, his face troubled. "We need more in there to cover the escape on the other end. It doesn't sound like we've lost many. They're just still having trouble with the retreat."

Many, he'd said. Not *any*. That meant we'd lost at least one person. I felt cold all over.

"Stephen, you go in," said Emil. He hesitated, and I could read his dilemma like a book. He wanted to go in too, but as the leader for this side, he was supposed to stay stationed here until the last possible moment. He was on the verge of disobeying those orders, I realized. He was considering going in with Stephen and leaving Shane and me out here. Yet, at the same time, he couldn't

bring himself to leave two novices here alone, should something unexpected happen. Emil exhaled, and he looked us over. “Rose, go with him.”

I didn’t waste a moment. Following Stephen, I slipped into the cave, and immediately, that nauseous feeling rolled over me. It had been cold outside, but it was colder still as we moved deeper. It was also darker. Our eyes could handle a fair amount of it, but it soon became too much. He flipped on a small light attached to his jacket.

“I wish I could tell you what to do, but I don’t know what we’ll find,” he told me. “Be ready for anything.”

The darkness in front of us began to fade. The sounds grew louder. We picked up the pace, glancing in all directions. Suddenly, we found ourselves in the large chamber shown on the map. A fire burned in one corner—one the Strigoi had made, not anything magical—that was providing the light. Looking around, I immediately saw what had happened.

Part of the wall had fallen in, creating a pile of stones. No one had been crushed under it, but it had almost entirely blocked the opening to the other side of the cave. I didn’t know if magic had caused it, or if the fighting had. Maybe it had been a coincidence. Whatever the reason, seven guardians—including Dimitri and Alberta—were trapped now by ten Strigoi. No Moroi fire users had been caught on this side, but the flashes of light coming through the opening in the cave-in showed me that they were still fighting on the other side. I saw bodies lying on the floor. Two were Strigoi, but I couldn’t make out the others.

The problem was obvious. Getting through the opening would require someone practically crawling. It would put the person in a vulnerable position. This meant these Strigoi needed to be taken out before the guardians could make their escape. Stephen and I were going to help even the odds. We came up from behind the Strigoi, but three of them sensed us somehow and turned toward us. Two jumped Stephen, and the other came at me.

Instantly, I kicked into battle mode. All the rage and frustration poured out through me. The cave made for close fighting quarters, but I was still able to evade him. In fact, the close space was to my advantage because the Strigoi, with his larger size, had trouble ducking and dodging. I stayed out of his reach mostly, though he did grab hold of me long enough to slam me against the wall. I didn’t even feel it. I just kept moving, going on the offensive. I eluded his next attack, got in some blows of my own, and, with my small size, managed to slip down and stake him before his next hit. I pulled out the blade in one smooth motion and went to help Stephen. He’d taken out one of his attackers, and between us, we finished the last one.

That left seven Strigoi now. No, six. The trapped guardians—who were having difficulty in their pinned position—had killed another. Stephen and I jerked the Strigoi closest to us out of the circle. He was a strong one—very old, very powerful—and even with the two of us, he was hard to take down. At last, we did. With the Strigoi numbers reduced, the other guardians were having an easier time getting to the rest. They started freeing themselves from their trapped position, and their numbers alone were now an aid.

When the Strigoi count was down to two, Alberta yelled at us to start escaping. Our alignment in the room had changed. We were now the ones

surrounding the last two Strigoi. This left the path clear for three of the guardians to escape via the way I'd come in. Stephen, meanwhile, crawled through the hole to the other side. Dimitri staked one of the two Strigoi. One left. Stephen stuck his head back in and shouted something to Alberta that I couldn't quite make out. She yelled something back without looking at him. She, Dimitri, and two others were closing in on the last Strigoi.

"Rose," yelled Stephen, beckoning.

Follow orders. That's what we did. I left the fray, scrambling through the hole more easily than he had, thanks to my smaller size. Another guardian immediately followed after me. No one was on this side of cave-in. The fight had either ended or moved on. Bodies showed that things had been intense, however. I saw more Strigoi, as well as a familiar face: Yuri. I hastily looked away toward Stephen, who was helping another guardian through. Alberta came next.

"They're dead," she called. "It sounds like there are a few more blocking the retreat down here. Let's finish this before the sun comes up."

Dimitri came last of all through the gap. He and I exchanged brief, relieved glances, and then we were on the move. This was the long part of the tunnel, and we hurried down it, anxious to get our remaining people out. At first, we encountered nothing, and then flashes of light indicated a fight up ahead. Ms. Carmack and my mother were fighting three Strigoi. My group closed in, and in seconds, the Strigoi were down.

"That's it for this group," my mother gasped out. I was grateful to see her alive too. "But I think there are more here than we thought. I think they left some behind when they went to attack the school. The rest of our people—that survived—have already made it out."

"There are other branches in the cave," said Alberta. "Strigoi could be hiding in there."

My mother agreed. "They could be. Some know they're overwhelmed and are just going to wait us out and escape later. Others may come after us."

"What do we do?" asked Stephen. "Finish them off? Or retreat?"

We turned to Alberta. She made a quick decision. "We retreat. We got as many as we could, and the sun is dropping. We need to get back behind the wards."

We took off, so close to victory, fueled by the disappearing light. Dimitri was beside me as we moved. "Did Eddie get out?" I hadn't seen his body, but I hadn't been paying much attention either.

"Yes," said Dimitri, breathing ragged. God only knew how many Strigoi he'd fought today. "We had to practically force him out. He wanted to fight." That sounded like Eddie.

"I remember this curve," my mother said as we rounded a corner. "It's not much farther. We should see light soon." Thus far, we were only guided by the jacket lights.

I felt the nausea only a split second before they attacked. At a T intersection, seven Strigoi jumped us. They'd let the earlier party escape, but they'd been lying in wait for us, three on one side and four on the other. One guardian, Alan, never saw it coming. A Strigoi grabbed him and snapped Alan's neck so quickly that it looked effortless. It probably was. It was such a

mirror to what had happened to Mason that I nearly came to a standstill. Instead, I doubled back, ready to get into the fray.

But we were in a narrow part of the tunnel, and not all of us could get through to the Strigoi. I was stuck in the back. Ms. Carmack was beside me, and she had enough visibility to light up a couple of the Strigoi, making it easier for those guardians in the fight to stake them.

Alberta caught a glimpse of me and a couple other guardians. "Start retreating!" she yelled.

None of us wanted to leave, but there wasn't much we could do. I saw one guardian fall, and my heart lurched. I hadn't known him, but it didn't matter. In seconds my mother was on the Strigoi attacker, driving her stake through his heart.

Then I lost sight of the fight as I rounded another corner with the three guardians with me. Farther down the corridor, I saw faint purplish light. The exit. Faces of other guardians peered in at us. We'd made it. But where were the others?

We ran to the exit, emerging into the air. My group clustered by the opening, anxious to see what had happened. The sun, I was dismayed to see, was nearly gone. The nausea hadn't left me, which meant Strigoi were still alive.

Moments later, my mother's party came tearing down the hall. By the numbers, one more had gone down. But they were so close. Everyone around me tensed up. So close. So, so close.

But not close enough. Three Strigoi lay in wait in one of the alcoves. We'd passed them, but they'd let us go by. It all happened so fast; no one could have reacted in time. One of the Strigoi grabbed Celeste, his mouth and fangs going for her cheek. I heard a strangled scream and saw blood everywhere. One of the Strigoi went for Ms. Carmack, but my mother jerked her away and shoved her forward toward us.

The third Strigoi grabbed Dimitri. In all the time I'd known him, I'd never seen Dimitri falter. He was always faster, always stronger than everyone else. Not this time. This Strigoi had caught him by surprise, and that slight edge was all it had taken.

I stared. It was the blond Strigoi. The one who had spoken to me in the battle.

He grabbed Dimitri and pulled him to the ground. They grappled, strength against strength, and then I saw those fangs sink into Dimitri's neck. The red eyes flicked up and made contact with my own.

I heard another scream—this time, it was my own.

My mother started to double back toward the fallen, but then five more Strigoi appeared. It was chaos. I couldn't see Dimitri anymore; I couldn't see what had happened to him. Indecision flashed over my mother's features as she tried to decide to flee or fight, and then, regret all over her face, she kept running toward us and the exit. Meanwhile, I was trying to run *back* inside, but someone was stopping me. It was Stan.

"What are you doing, Rose? More are coming."

Didn't he understand? Dimitri was in there. I had to get Dimitri.

My mother and Alberta burst out, dragging Ms. Carmack. A group of Strigoi

were after them, skidding to a halt just on the edge of the waning light. I was still fighting Stan. He didn't need the help, but my mother grasped a hold of me and tugged me away.

"Rose, we have to get out of here!"

"He's in there!" I screamed, straining as hard as I could. How could I have killed Strigoi and not been able to break free from these two? "Dimitri's in there! We have to go back for him! We can't leave him!"

I was rambling, hysterical, shouting at them all that we had to go rescue Dimitri. My mother shook me hard and leaned close so there were only a couple inches between us.

"He is dead, Rose! We can't go back in there. The sun will be down in fifteen minutes, and they are waiting for us. We're going to be in the dark before we can get back to the wards. We need every second we can get—it still may not be enough."

I could see the Strigoi gathered at the entrance, their red eyes gleaming with anticipation. They completely filled the opening, ten I believed. Maybe more. My mother was right. With their speed, even our fifteen-minute lead might not be enough. And yet, I still couldn't take a step. I couldn't stop staring at the cave, back where Dimitri was, back where half of my soul was. He couldn't be dead. If he was, then surely I would be dead too.

My mother slapped me, the pain snapping me out of my daze.

"Run!" she yelled at me. "*He is dead*! You are not going to join him!"

I saw the panic in her own face, panic over me—her daughter—getting killed. I remembered Dimitri saying he'd rather die than see me dead. And if I stood there stupidly, letting the Strigoi get me, I'd fail both of them.

"Run!" she cried again.

Tears streaming down my face, I ran.

TWENTY-EIGHT

THE NEXT TWELVE HOURS were the longest in my life.

Our group made it back to campus safely, though most of it was done at a run—which was hard with so many injured. The entire time I felt nauseous, presumably because Strigoi were near. If they were, they never caught up to us, and it's possible I was simply sick from everything that had happened in the caves.

Once back behind the wards, the other novices and I were forgotten. We were safe, and the adults now had a lot of other things to concern themselves with. All of the captives had been rescued—all the ones that were alive. As I'd feared, the Strigoi had decided to munch on one before we got there. That meant we had rescued twelve. Six guardians—including Dimitri—had been lost. Those weren't bad numbers considering how many Strigoi we'd faced, but when you took the difference, it really meant we'd only saved six lives. Had the loss of all those guardians' lives been worth it?

"You can't look at it that way," Eddie told me as we walked toward the clinic. Everyone, prisoners and raiders, had been ordered to get checked out. "You didn't just save those lives. You guys killed almost thirty Strigoi, plus the ones on campus. Think about all the people they would have killed. You essentially saved all those people's lives too."

A rational part of me knew he was right. But what did rationality have to do with anything when Dimitri might be dead? It was petty and selfish, but in that moment, I wanted to trade all those lives for his. He wouldn't have wanted that, though. I knew him.

And through the tiniest, smallest chance, it was possible he wasn't dead. Even though the bite had looked pretty serious, that Strigoi could have incapacitated him and then fled. He could be lying in the caves right now,

dying and in need of medical care. It drove me crazy, thinking of him like that and us unable to help. There was no way we could go back, however. Not until daytime. Another party would go then to bring back our dead so that we could bury them. Until then, I had to wait.

Dr. Olendzki gave me a quick check, decided I didn't have a concussion, and then sent me on my way to bandage my own scrapes. She had too many others to worry about right now who were in far worse condition.

I knew the smart thing was to go to my dorm or to Lissa. I could have used the rest, and through the bond, I felt her calling to me. She was worried. She was afraid. I knew she'd find out the news soon, though. She didn't need me, and I didn't want to see her. I didn't want to see anyone. So rather than go to my dorm, I went to the chapel. I needed to do something until the caves could be checked out. Praying was as good an option as any.

The chapel was usually empty in the middle of the day, but not this time. I shouldn't have been surprised. Considering the death and tragedy of the last twenty-four hours, it was only natural that people would seek comfort. Some sat alone, some sat in groups. They cried. They knelt. They prayed. Some simply stared off into space, clearly unable to believe what had happened. Father Andrew moved around the sanctuary, speaking to many of them.

I found an empty pew in the very back corner and sat there. Drawing my knees up to me, I wrapped my arms around them and rested my head. On the walls, icons of saints and angels watched over all of us.

Dimitri couldn't be dead. There was no way he could be. Surely, if he was, I would know. No one could take a life like that from the world. No one who had held me in bed like he had yesterday could really be gone. We had been too warm, too alive. Death couldn't follow something like that.

Lissa's *chotki* was around my wrist, and I ran my fingers over the cross and the beads. I tried desperately to put my thoughts into the forms of prayers, but I didn't know how. If God was real, I figured He was powerful enough to know what I wanted without me actually saying the right words.

Hours passed. People came and went. I got tired of sitting and eventually stretched myself across the length of the pew. From the gold-painted ceiling, more saints and angels stared down at me. So much divine help, I thought, but what good were they really doing?

I didn't even realize I'd fallen asleep until Lissa woke me up. She looked like an angel herself, the pale hair hanging long and loose around her face. Her eyes were as gentle and compassionate as those of the saints.

"Rose," she said. "We've been looking all over for you. Have you been here the entire time?"

I sat up, feeling tired and bleary-eyed. Considering I hadn't slept the night before and had then gone on a massive raid, my fatigue was understandable.

"Pretty much," I told her.

She shook her head. "That was hours ago. You should go eat something."

"I'm not hungry." *Hours ago*. I clutched her arm. "What time is it? Has the sun come up?"

"No. It's still about, oh, five hours away."

Five hours. How could I wait that long?

Lissa touched my face. I felt magic burn through our bond, and then the

warm and cold tingling coursed through my own skin. Bruises and cuts disappeared.

"You shouldn't do that," I said.

A faint smile crossed her lips. "I've been doing it all day. I've been helping Dr. Olendzki."

"I heard that, but wow. It just feels so strange. We've always kept it hidden, you know?"

"It doesn't matter if everyone knows now," she said with a shrug. "After everything that's happened, I had to help. So many people are hurt, and if it means my secret getting out . . . well, it had to happen sooner or later. Adrian's been helping too, though he can't do as much."

And then, it hit me. I straightened up.

"Oh my God, Liss. You can save him. You can help Dimitri."

Deep sorrow filled her face and the bond. "Rose," she said quietly. "They say Dimitri's dead."

"No," I said. "He can't be. You don't understand. . . . I think he was just injured. Probably badly. But if you're there when they bring him back, you can heal him." Then, the craziest thought of all came to me. "And if . . . if he did die . . ." The words hurt coming out. "You could bring him back! Just like with me. He'd be shadow-kissed too."

Her face grew even sadder. Sorrow—for me now—radiated out from her. "I can't do that. Bringing people back from the dead is a huge power drain . . . and besides, I don't think I could do it on someone who has been dead, um, that long. I think it has to be recent."

I could hear the crazy desperation in my own voice. "But you have to try."

"I can't. . . ." She swallowed. "You heard what I said to the queen. I meant it. I can't go around bringing every dead person back to life. That gets into the kind of abuse Victor wanted. It's why we kept this secret."

"You'd let him die? You wouldn't do this? You wouldn't do this for me?" I wasn't shouting, but my voice was definitely too loud for a church. Most everyone was gone now, and with the level of grief around here, I doubted anyone thought too much of an outburst. "I would do *anything* for you. You know that. And you won't do this for me?" I was on the verge of sobbing.

Lissa studied me, a million thoughts swirling in her mind. She assessed my words, my face, my voice. And like that, she finally got it. She finally realized what I felt for Dimitri, that it was more than a teacher-student bond. I felt the knowledge light up in her mind. Countless connections suddenly came together for her: comments I'd made, ways that Dimitri and I acted around each other . . . it all made sense to her now, things she'd been too blind to notice. Questions immediately sprang up too, but she didn't ask any of them or even mention what she'd realized. Instead, she just took my hand in hers and pulled me close.

"I'm so sorry, Rose. I'm so, so sorry. I can't."

I let her drag me away after that, presumably to get food. But when I sat at the cafeteria table and stared at the tray in front of me, the thought of eating anything made me sicker than being around the Strigoi had. She gave up after that, realizing nothing was going to happen until I knew what had happened to Dimitri. We went up to her room, and I lay down on the bed. She sat near

me, but I didn't want to talk, and I soon fell asleep again.

The next time I woke up, it was my mother beside me.

"Rose, we're going to check the caves. You can't go into them, but you can come to the school's borders with us if you want."

It was the best I could get. If it meant I could find out what had happened to Dimitri a moment sooner than if I stayed here, I'd do it. Lissa came with me, and we trailed behind the assembled guardian party. I was still hurt by her refusal to heal Dimitri, but a part of me secretly thought she wouldn't be able to hold back once she saw him.

The guardians had assembled a large group to check the caves, just in case. We were pretty sure the Strigoi were gone, however. They'd lost their advantage and had to know that if we came back for the dead, it would be with renewed numbers. Any of them that had survived would be gone.

The guardians crossed over the wards, and the rest of us who had followed along waited by the border. Hardly anyone spoke. It would probably be three hours before they came back, counting travel time. Trying to ignore the dark, leaden feeling inside of me, I sat on the ground and rested my head against Lissa's shoulder, wishing the minutes would fly by. A Moroi fire user created a bonfire, and we all warmed ourselves by it.

The minutes didn't fly, but they did eventually pass. Someone shouted that the guardians were coming back. I leapt up and ran to look. What I saw drove me to a halt.

Stretchers. Stretchers carrying the bodies of those who had been killed. Dead guardians, their faces pale and eyes unseeing. One of the watching Moroi went and threw up in a bush. Lissa started crying. One by one, the dead filed past us. I stared, feeling cold and empty, wondering if I'd see their ghosts the next time I went outside the wards.

Finally, the whole group had gone by. Five bodies, but it had felt like five hundred. And there was one body I hadn't seen. One I'd been dreading. I ran up to my mother. She was helping carry a stretcher. She wouldn't look at me and undoubtedly knew what I'd come to ask.

"Where's Dimitri?" I demanded. "Is he . . ." It was too much to hope for, too much to ask. "Is he alive?" Oh God. What if my prayers had been answered? What if he was back there injured, waiting for them to send a doctor?

My mother didn't answer right away. I barely recognized her voice when she did.

"He wasn't there, Rose."

I stumbled over the uneven ground and had to hurry up to catch her again. "Wait, what's that mean? Maybe he's injured and left to get help. . . ."

She still wouldn't look at me. "Molly wasn't there either."

Molly was the Moroi who had been snacked on. She was my age, tall and beautiful. I'd seen her body in the cave, drained of blood. She had definitely been dead. There was no way she'd been injured and staggered out. Molly and Dimitri. Both their bodies gone.

"No," I gasped out. "You don't think . . ."

A tear leaked out of my mother's eye. I'd never seen anything like that from her. "I don't know what to think, Rose. If he survived, it's possible . . . it's possible they took him for later."

The thought of Dimitri as a "snack" was too horrible for words—but it wasn't as horrible as the alternative. We both knew it.

"But they wouldn't have taken Molly for later. She'd been dead a while."

My mother nodded. "I'm sorry, Rose. We can't know for sure. It's likely they're both just dead, and the Strigoi dragged their bodies off."

She was lying. It was the first time in my entire life that my mother had ever told me a lie to protect me. She wasn't the comforting kind, wasn't the kind who would make up pretty stories in order to make someone feel better. She always told the harsh truth.

Not this time.

I stopped walking, and the group continued filing past me. Lissa caught up, worried and confused.

"What's happening?" she asked.

I didn't answer. Instead, I turned and ran backwards, back toward the wards. She ran after me, calling my name. No one else noticed us because honestly, who in the world was stupid enough to cross the wards after everything that had happened?

I was, although in daylight, I had nothing to fear. I ran past the place Jesse's group had attacked her, stepping across the invisible lines that marked the boundaries of the Academy's grounds. Lissa hesitated a moment and then joined me. She was breathless from running after me.

"Rose, what are you—"

"Mason!" I cried. "Mason, I need you."

It took him a little while to materialize. This time, he not only seemed ultra-pale, he also appeared to be flickering, like a light about to go out. He stood there, watching me, and although his expression was the same as always, I had the weirdest feeling that he knew what I was going to ask. Lissa, beside me, kept glancing back and forth between me and the spot I was speaking to.

"Mason, is Dimitri dead?"

Mason shook his head.

"Is he alive?"

Mason shook his head.

Neither alive nor dead. The world swam around me, sparkles of color dancing before my eyes. The lack of food had made me dizzy, and I was on the verge of fainting. I had to stay in control here. I had to ask the next question. Out of all the victims . . . out of all the victims they could have chosen, surely they wouldn't have picked him.

The next words stuck in my throat, and I sank to my knees as I spoke them.

"Is he . . . is Dimitri a Strigoi?"

Mason hesitated only a moment, like he was afraid to answer me, and then —he nodded.

My heart shattered. My world shattered.

You will lose what you value most. . . .

It hadn't been me that Rhonda was talking about. It hadn't even been Dimitri's life.

What you value most.

It had been his soul.

TWENTY-NINE

NEARLY A WEEK LATER, I showed up at Adrian's door.

We hadn't had classes since the attack, but our normal curfew hours were still in effect, and it was almost bedtime. Adrian's face registered complete and total shock when he saw me. It was the first time I'd ever sought him out, rather than vice versa.

"Little dhampir," he said, stepping aside. "Come in."

I did, and was nearly overwhelmed by the smell of alcohol as I passed him. The Academy's guest housing was nice, but he clearly hadn't done much to keep his suite clean. I had a feeling he'd probably been drinking nonstop since the attack. The TV was on, and a small table by the couch held a half-empty bottle of vodka. I picked it up and read the label. It was in Russian.

"Bad time?" I asked, setting it back down.

"Never a bad time for you," he told me gallantly. His face looked haggard. He was still as good-looking as ever, but there were dark circles under his eyes like he hadn't been sleeping well. He waved me toward an armchair and sat down on the couch. "Haven't seen much of you."

I leaned back. "I haven't wanted to be seen," I admitted.

I'd hardly spoken to anyone since the attack. I'd spent a lot of time by myself or with Lissa. I took comfort from being around her, but we hadn't said much. She understood that I needed to process things and had simply been there for me, not pushing me on things I didn't want to talk about—even though there were a dozen things she wanted to ask.

The Academy's dead had been honored in one group memorial service, although their families had made arrangements for each person's respective funeral. I'd gone to the larger service. The chapel had been packed, with standing room only. Father Andrew had read the names of the dead, listing

Dimitri and Molly among them. No one was talking about what had really happened to them. There was too much other grief anyway. We were drowning in it. No one even knew how the Academy would pick up the pieces and start running again.

"You look worse than I do," I told Adrian. "I didn't think that was possible."

He brought the bottle to his lips and took a long drink. "Nah, you always look good. As for me . . . well, it's hard to explain. The auras are getting to me. There's so much sorrow around here. You can't even begin to understand. It radiates from everyone on a spiritual level. It's overwhelming. It makes your dark aura downright cheerful."

"Is that why you're drinking?"

"Yup. It's shut my aura-vision right off, thankfully, so I can't give you a report today." He offered me the bottle, and I shook my head. He shrugged and took another drink. "So what can I do for you, Rose? I have a feeling you aren't here to check on me."

He was right, and I only felt a little bad about what I was here for. I'd done a lot of thinking this last week. Processing my grief for Mason had been hard. In fact, I hadn't even really quite resolved it when the ghost business had started. Now I had to mourn all over again. After all, more than Dimitri had been lost. Teachers had died, guardians and Moroi alike. None of my close friends had died, but people I knew from classes had. They'd been students at the Academy as long as I had, and it was weird to think I'd never see them again. That was a lot of loss to deal with, a lot of people to say goodbye to.

But . . . Dimitri. He was a different case. After all, how did you say goodbye to someone who wasn't exactly gone? That was the problem.

"I need money," I told Adrian, not bothering with pretense.

He arched an eyebrow. "Unexpected. From you, at least. I get that kind of request a lot from others. Pray tell, what would I be funding?"

I glanced away from him, focusing on the television. It was a commercial for some kind of deodorant.

"I'm leaving the Academy," I said finally.

"Also unexpected. You're only a few months out from graduation."

I met his eyes. "It doesn't matter. I have things to do now."

"I never figured you'd be one of the dropout guardians. You going to join the blood whores?"

"No," I said. "Of course not."

"Don't act so offended. That's not an unreasonable assumption. If you're not going to be a guardian, what else are you going to do?"

"I told you. I have things I have to take care of."

He arched an eyebrow. "Things that are going to get you into trouble?"

I shrugged. He laughed.

"Stupid question, huh? Everything you do gets you in trouble." He propped his elbow up on the couch's arm and rested his chin in his hand. "Why'd you come to me for money?"

"Because you have it."

This also made him laugh. "And why do you think I'll give it to you?"

I didn't say anything. I just looked at him, forcing as much womanly charm as I could into my expression. His smile went away, and his green eyes

narrowed in frustration. He jerked his gaze away.

"Damn it, Rose. Don't do that. Not now. You're playing on how I feel about you. That's not fair." He gulped more vodka.

He was right. I'd come to him because I thought I could use his crush to get what I wanted. It was low, but I had no choice. Getting up, I moved over and sat beside him. I held his hand.

"Please, Adrian," I said. "Please help me. You're the only one I can go to."

"That's not fair," he repeated, slurring his words a little. "You're using those come-hither eyes on me, but it's not me you want. It's never been me. It's always been Belikov, and God only knows what you'll do now that he's gone."

He was right about that too. "Will you help me?" I asked, still playing up the charisma. "You're the only one I could talk to . . . the only one who really understands me. . . ."

"Are you coming back?" he countered.

"Eventually."

Tipping his head back, he exhaled a heavy breath. His hair, which I'd always thought looked stylishly messy, simply looked messy today. "Maybe it's for the best if you leave. Maybe you'll get over him faster if you go away for a while. Wouldn't hurt to be away from Lissa's aura either. It might slow yours from darkening—stop this rage you always seem to be in. You need to be happier. And stop seeing ghosts."

My seduction faltered for a moment. "Lissa isn't why I'm seeing ghosts. Well, she is, but not in the way you think. I see the ghosts because I'm shadow-kissed. I'm tied to the world of the dead, and the more I kill, the stronger that connection becomes. It's why I see the dead and why I feel weird when Strigoi are near. I can sense them now. They're tied to that world too."

He frowned. "You're saying the auras mean nothing? That you aren't taking away the effects of spirit?"

"No. That's happening too. That's why this has all been so confusing. I thought there was just one thing going on, but there've been two. I see the ghosts because of being shadow-kissed. I'm getting . . . upset and angry . . . bad, even . . . because I'm taking away Lissa's dark side. That's why my aura's darkening, why I'm getting so enraged lately. Right now, it just sort of plays out as a really bad temper. . . ." I frowned, thinking of the night Dimitri had stopped me from going after Jesse. "But I don't know what it'll turn into next."

Adrian sighed. "Why is everything so complicated with you?"

"Will you help me? Please, Adrian?" I ran my fingers along his hand. "Please help me."

Low, low. This was so low of me, but it didn't matter. Only Dimitri did.

Finally, Adrian looked back at me. For the first time ever, he looked vulnerable. "When you come back, will you give me a fair shot?"

I hid my surprise. "What do you mean?"

"It's like I said. You've never wanted me, never even considered me. The flowers, the flirting . . . it rolled right off you. You were so gone for him, and nobody noticed. If you go do your thing, will you take me seriously? Will you give me a chance when you return?"

I stared. I definitely hadn't expected this. My initial instinct was to say no, that I could never love anybody again, that my heart had been shattered along

with that piece of my soul that Dimitri held. But Adrian was looking at me so earnestly, and there was none of his joking nature. He meant what he said, and I realized all the affection for me he'd always teased about hadn't been a joke either. Lissa had been right about his feelings.

"Will you?" he repeated.

God only knows what you'll do now that he's gone.

"Of course." Not an honest answer, but a necessary one.

Adrian looked away and drank more vodka. There wasn't much left. "When are you leaving?"

"Tomorrow."

Setting the bottle down, he stood up and walked off into the bedroom. He returned with a large stack of cash. I wondered if he kept it under his bed or something. He handed it to me wordlessly and then picked up the phone and made some calls. The sun was up, and the human world, which handled most Moroi money, was also up and awake.

I tried to watch TV while he talked, but I couldn't concentrate. I kept wanting to scratch the back of my neck. Because there was no way of knowing exactly how many Strigoi I and the others had killed, we'd all been given a different kind of tattoo instead of the usual set of *molnija* marks. I'd forgotten its name, but this tattoo looked like a little star. It meant that the bearer had been in a battle and killed many Strigoi.

When he finally finished his calls, Adrian handed me a piece of paper. It had the name and address of a bank in Missoula.

"Go there," he said. "I'm guessing you have to go to Missoula first anyway if you're actually going on to anywhere civilized. There's an account set up for you with . . . a lot of money in it. Talk to them, and they'll finish the paperwork with you."

I stood up and stuffed the bills in my jacket. "Thank you," I said.

Without hesitating, I reached out and hugged him. The scent of vodka was overpowering, but I felt I owed him. I was taking advantage of his feelings for me in order to further my own devices. He put his arms around me and held me for several seconds before letting go. I brushed my lips against his cheek as we broke apart, and I thought he might stop breathing.

"I won't forget this," I murmured in his ear.

"I don't suppose you'll tell me where you're going?" he asked.

"No," I said. "I'm sorry."

"Just keep your promise and come back."

"I didn't actually use the word *promise*," I pointed out.

He smiled and pressed a kiss to my forehead. "You're right. I'm going to miss you, little dhampir. Be careful. If you ever need anything, let me know. I'll be waiting for you."

I thanked him again and left, not bothering to tell him he might be waiting a long time. There was a very real possibility that I might not be coming back.

The next day, I got up early, long before most of campus was awake. I'd hardly slept. I slung a bag over my shoulder and walked over to the main office in the administrative building. The office wasn't open yet either, so I sat down on the floor in the hallway outside of it. Studying my hands as I waited, I noticed two tiny flecks of gold on my thumbnail. They were the only

remnants of my manicure. About twenty minutes later, the secretary showed up with the keys and let me in.

"What can I do for you?" she asked, once she was seated at her desk.

I handed her a stack of papers I'd been holding. "I'm withdrawing."

Her eyes widened to impossible size. "But . . . what . . . you can't . . ."

I tapped the stack. "I can. It's all filled out."

Still gaping, she muttered something to me about waiting, and then scurried out of the room. A few minutes later, she returned with Headmistress Kirova. Kirova had apparently been briefed and was looking at me very disapprovingly down her beaklike nose.

"Miss Hathaway, what's the meaning of this?"

"I'm leaving," I said. "Quitting. Dropping out. Whatever."

"You can't do that," she said.

"Well, obviously I can, since you guys keep withdrawal paperwork in the library. It's all filled out the way it needs to be."

Her anger changed into something sadder and more anxious. "I know a lot has gone on lately—we're all having trouble adjusting—but that's no reason to make a hasty decision. If anything, we need you more than ever." She was almost pleading. Hard to believe she'd wanted to expel me six months ago.

"This wasn't hasty," I said. "I thought a lot about it."

"Let me at least get your mother so we can talk this out."

"She left for Europe three days ago. Not that it matters anyway." I pointed to the line on the top form that said *date of birth*. "I'm eighteen today. She can't do anything anymore. This is my choice. Now, will you stamp the form, or are you actually going to try to restrain me? Pretty sure I could take you in a fight, Kirova."

They stamped my packet, not happily. The secretary made a copy of the official paper that declared I was no longer a student at St. Vladimir's Academy. I'd need it to get out the main gate.

It was a long walk to the front of the school, and the western sky was red as the sun slipped over the horizon. The weather had warmed up, even at night. Spring had finally come. It made for good walking weather since I had a ways to go before I made it to the highway. From there, I'd hitchhike to Missoula. Hitchhiking wasn't safe, but the silver stake in my coat pocket made me feel pretty secure about anything I'd face. No one had taken it away from me after the raid, and it would work just as well against creepy humans as it did with Strigoi.

I could just make out the gates when I sensed her. Lissa. I stopped walking and turned toward a cluster of bud-covered trees. She'd been standing in them, perfectly still, and had managed to hide her thoughts so well that I hadn't realized she was practically right next to me. Her hair and eyes glowed in the sunset, and she seemed too beautiful and too ethereal to be part of this dreary landscape.

"Hey," I said.

"Hey." She wrapped her arms around herself, cold even in her coat. Moroi didn't have the same resistance to temperature changes that dhampirs did. What I found warm and springlike was still chilly to her. "I knew it," she said. "Ever since that day they said his body was gone. Something told me you'd do

this. I was just waiting."

"Can you read my mind now?" I asked ruefully.

"No, I can just read you. Finally. I can't believe how blind I was. I can't believe I never noticed. Victor's comment . . . he was right." She glanced off at the sunset, then turned her gaze back on me. A flash of anger, both in her feelings and her eyes, hit me. "Why didn't you tell me?" she cried. "Why didn't you tell me you loved Dimitri?"

I stared. I couldn't remember the last time Lissa had yelled at anyone. Maybe last fall, when all the Victor insanity had gone down. Loud outbursts were my thing, not hers. Even when torturing Jesse, her voice had been deadly quiet.

"I couldn't tell anyone," I said.

"I'm your best friend, Rose. We've been through everything together. Do you really think I would have told? I would have kept it secret."

I looked at the ground. "I know you would have. I just . . . I don't know. I couldn't talk about it. Not even to you. I can't explain it."

"How . . ." She groped for the question her mind had already formed. "How serious was it? Was it just you or—?"

"It was both of us," I told her. "He felt the same. But we knew we couldn't be together, not with our age . . . and, well, not when we were supposed to be protecting you."

Lissa frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Dimitri always said that if we were involved, we'd worry more about protecting each other than you. We couldn't do that."

Guilt coursed through her at the thought that she'd been responsible for keeping us apart.

"It's not your fault," I said quickly.

"Surely . . . there must have been a way. . . . It wouldn't have been a problem. . . ."

I shrugged, unwilling to think about or mention our last kiss in the forest, back when Dimitri and I had thought we'd figured out a solution to all of our problems.

"I don't know," I said. "We just tried to stay apart. Sometimes it worked. Sometimes it didn't."

Her mind was a tumble of emotions. She felt sorry for me, but at the same time, she was mad. "You should have told me," she repeated. "I feel like you don't trust me."

"Of course I trust you."

"Is that why you're sneaking off?"

"That has nothing to do with trust," I admitted. "It's me . . . well, I didn't want to tell you. I couldn't bear to tell you I was leaving or explain why."

"I already know," she said. "I figured it out."

"How?" I asked. Lissa was full of surprises today.

"I was there. Last fall when we took that van into Missoula. The shopping trip? You and Dimitri were talking about Strigoi, about how becoming one makes you something twisted and evil . . . how it destroys the person you used to be and makes you do horrible things. And I heard . . ." She had trouble saying it. I had trouble hearing it, and my eyes grew wet. The memory was too

harsh, thinking of sitting with him that day, back when we were first falling in love. Lissa swallowed and continued. “I heard you both say you’d rather die than become a monster like that.”

Silence fell between us. The wind picked up and blew our hair around, dark and light.

“I have to do this, Liss. I have to do it for him.”

“No,” she said firmly. “You don’t have to. You didn’t promise him anything.”

“Not in words, no. But you . . . you don’t understand.”

“I understand that you’re trying to cope and that this is as good a way as any. You need to find another way to let him go.”

I shook my head. “I have to do this.”

“Even if it means leaving me?”

The way she said it, the way she looked at me . . . oh God. A flood of memories flitted through my mind. We’d been together since childhood. Inseparable. Bound. And yet . . . Dimitri and I had been connected too. Damn it. I’d never wanted to have to choose between them.

“I have to do this,” I said yet again. “I’m sorry.”

“You’re supposed to be my guardian and go with me to college,” she argued. “You’re shadow-kissed. We’re supposed to be together. If you leave me . . .”

The ugly coil of darkness was starting to raise its head in my chest. My voice was tight when I spoke. “If I leave you, they’ll get you another guardian. Two of them. You’re the last Dragomir. They’ll keep you safe.”

“But they won’t be you, Rose,” she said. Those luminous green eyes held mine, and the anger in me cooled. She was so beautiful, so sweet . . . and she seemed so reasonable. She was right. I owed it to her. I needed to—

“Stop it!” I yelled, turning away. She’d been using her magic. “Do *not* use compulsion on me. You’re my friend. Friends don’t use their powers on each other.”

“Friends don’t abandon each other,” she snapped back. “If you were my friend, you wouldn’t do it.”

I spun back toward her, careful not to look too closely into her eyes, in case she tried compulsion on me again. The rage in me exploded.

“It’s not about you, okay? This time, it’s about me. Not you. All my life, Lissa . . . all my life, it’s been the same. *They come first*. I’ve lived my life for you. I’ve trained to be your shadow, but you know what? I want to come first. I need to take care of myself for once. I’m tired of looking out for everyone else and having to put aside what *I* want. Dimitri and I did that, and look what happened. He’s gone. I will never hold him again. Now I owe it to him to do this. I’m sorry if it hurts you, but it’s my choice!”

I’d shouted the words, not even pausing for a breath, and I hoped my voice hadn’t carried to the guardians on duty at the gate. Lissa was staring at me, shocked and hurt. Tears ran down her cheeks, and part of me shriveled up at hurting the person I’d sworn to protect.

“You love him more than me,” she said in a small voice, sounding very young.

“He needs me right now.”

“I need you. He’s gone, Rose.”

"No," I said. "But he will be soon." I reached up my sleeve and took off the *chotki* she'd given me for Christmas. I held it out to her. She hesitated and then took it.

"What's this for?" she asked.

"I can't wear it. It's for a Dragomir guardian. I'll take it again when I . . ." I had almost said *if*, not *when*. I think she knew that. "When I get back."

Her hands closed around the beads. "Please, Rose. Please don't leave me."

"I'm sorry," I said. There were no other words to offer up. "I'm sorry."

I left her there crying as I walked toward the gate. A piece of my soul had died when Dimitri had fallen. Turning my back on her now, I felt another piece die as well. Soon there wouldn't be anything left inside of me.

The guardians at the gate were as shocked as the secretary and Kirova had been, but there was nothing they could do. *Happy birthday to me*, I thought bitterly. Eighteen at last. It was nothing like I had expected.

They opened the gates and I stepped through, outside of the school's grounds and over the wards. The lines were invisible, but I felt strangely vulnerable and exposed, as if I'd leapt a great chasm. And yet, *at the same time*, I felt free and in control. I started walking down the narrow road. The sun was nearly gone; I'd have to rely on moonlight soon.

When I was out of earshot of the guardians, I stopped and spoke. "Mason."

I had to wait a long time. When he appeared, I could barely see him at all. He was almost completely transparent.

"It's time, isn't it? You're going . . . you're finally moving on to . . ."

Well, I had no clue where he was moving on to. I didn't know anymore what lay beyond, whether it was the realms Father Andrew believed in or some entirely different world that I'd visited. Nonetheless, Mason understood and nodded.

"It's been more than forty days," I mused. "So I guess you're overdue. I'm glad . . . I mean, I hope you find peace. Although I kind of hoped you'd be able to lead me to him."

Mason shook his head, and he didn't need to say a word for me to understand what he wanted to tell me. *You're on your own now, Rose*.

"It's okay. You deserve your rest. Besides, I think I know where to start looking." I'd thought about this constantly over the last week. If Dimitri was where I believed he was, I had a lot of work ahead of me. Mason's help would have been nice, but I didn't want to keep bothering him. It seemed like he had enough to deal with.

"Goodbye," I told him. "Thanks for your help. . . . I . . . I'll miss you."

His form grew fainter and fainter, and just before it went altogether, I saw the hint of a smile, that laughing and mischievous smile I'd loved so much. For the first time since his death, thinking about Mason no longer devastated me. I was sad and I really would miss him, but I knew he'd moved on to something good—something really good. I no longer felt guilty.

Turning away, I stared at the long road winding off ahead of me. I sighed. This trip might take awhile.

"Then start walking, Rose," I muttered to myself.

I set off, off to kill the man I loved.

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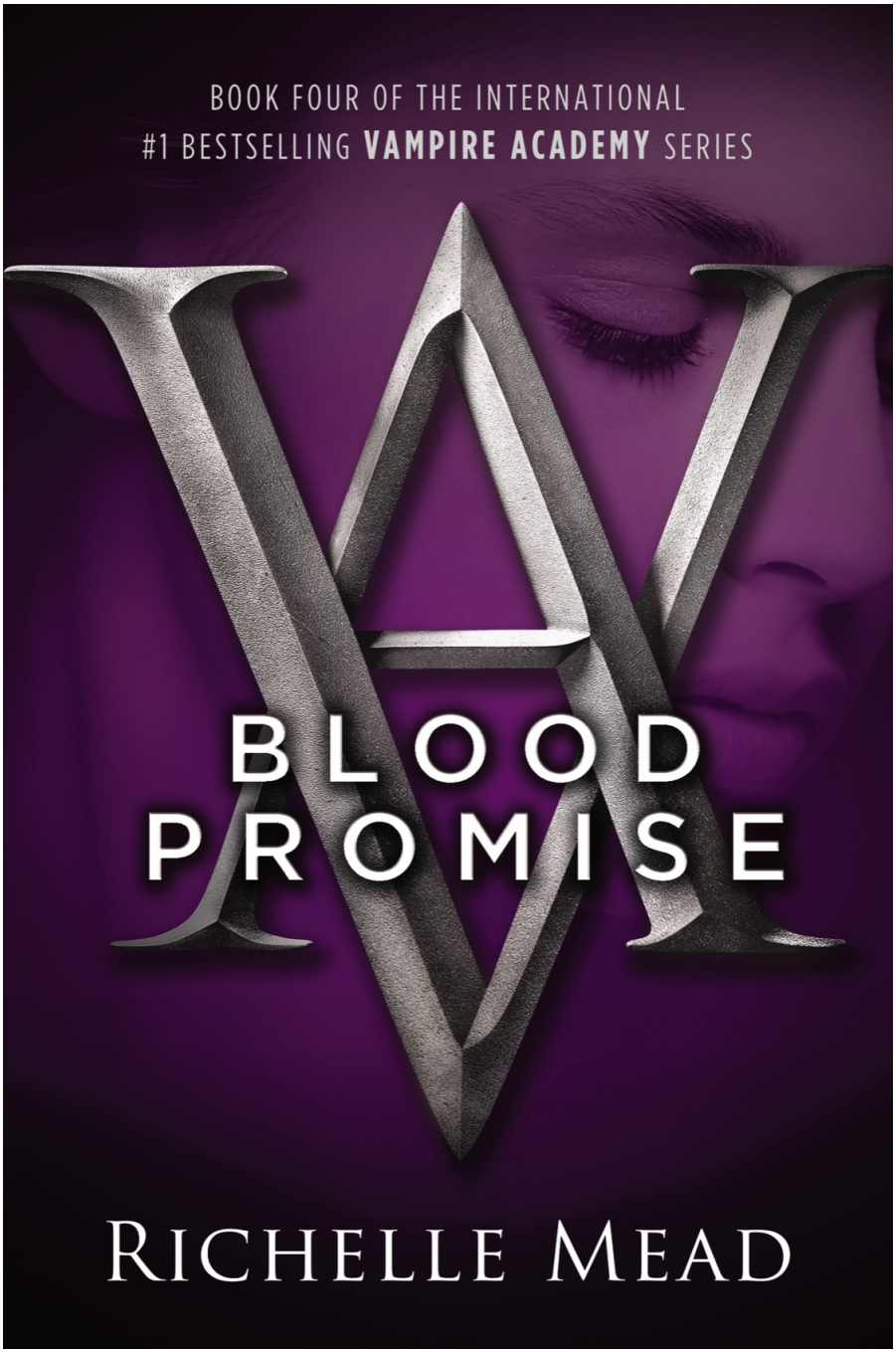
BOOK FOUR OF THE INTERNATIONAL
#1 BESTSELLING VAMPIRE ACADEMY SERIES
BLOOD PROMISE
RICHELLE MEAD

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Version_7

In memory of my grandmother,
a feisty southern lady and the best
cook I've ever known.

PROLOGUE

ONCE WHEN I WAS IN ninth grade, I had to write a paper on a poem. One of the lines was, "If your eyes weren't open, you wouldn't know the difference between dreaming and waking." It hadn't meant much to me at the time. After all, there'd been a guy in the class that I liked, so how could I be expected to pay attention to literary analysis? Now, three years later, I understood the poem perfectly.

Because lately, my life really did seem like it was on the precipice of being a dream. There were days I thought I'd wake up and discover that recent events in my life hadn't actually happened. Surely I must be a princess in an enchanted sleep. Any day now, this dream—no, nightmare—would end, and I'd get my prince and happy ending.

But there was no happy ending to be found, at least not in the foreseeable future. And my prince? Well, that was a long story. My prince had been turned into a vampire—a Strigoi, to be specific. In my world, there are two kinds of vampires who exist in secrecy from humans. The Moroi are living vampires, good vampires who wield elemental magic and don't kill when seeking the blood they need to survive. Strigoi are undead vampires, immortal and twisted, who kill when they feed. Moroi are born. Strigoi are *made*—forcibly or by choice—through evil means.

And Dimitri, the guy I loved, had been made a Strigoi against his will. He'd been turned during a battle, an epic rescue mission that I'd been part of as well. Strigoi had kidnapped Moroi and dhampirs from the school I attended, and we'd set out with others to save them. Dhampirs are half-vampire and half-human—gifted with human strength and hardiness, and Moroi reflexes and senses. Dhampirs train to become guardians, the elite bodyguards who protect Moroi. That's what I am. That's what Dimitri had been.

After his conversion, the rest of the Moroi world had considered him dead. And to a certain extent, he was. Those who were turned Strigoi lost all sense of the goodness and life they'd had before. Even if they hadn't turned by choice, it didn't matter. They would still become evil and cruel, just like all Strigoi. The person they'd been was gone, and honestly, it was easier to imagine them moving on to heaven or the next life than to picture them out stalking the night and taking victims. But I hadn't been able to forget Dimitri, or accept that he was essentially dead. He was the man I loved, the man with whom I'd been so perfectly in sync that it was hard to know where I ended and he began. My heart refused to let him go—even if he was technically a monster, he was still out there somewhere. I also hadn't forgotten a conversation he and I had once had. We'd both agreed that we'd rather be dead—truly dead—than walk the world as Strigoi.

And once I'd had my mourning time for the goodness he'd lost, I'd decided I had to honor his wishes. Even if he no longer believed in them. I had to find

him. I had to kill him and free his soul from that dark, unnatural state. I knew it was what the Dimitri I had loved would have wanted. Killing Strigoi isn't easy, though. They're insanely fast and strong. They have no mercy. I'd killed a number of them already—pretty crazy for someone who was freshly eighteen. And I knew taking on Dimitri would be my greatest challenge, both physically and emotionally.

In fact, the emotional consequences had kicked in as soon as I made my decision. Going after Dimitri had meant doing a few life-altering things (and that wasn't even counting the fact that fighting him could very likely result in the loss of my life). I was still in school, only a handful of months away from graduating and becoming a full-fledged guardian. Every day I stuck around at St. Vladimir's Academy—a remote, protected school for Moroi and dhampirs—meant one more day was going by in which Dimitri was still out there, living in the state he'd never wanted. I loved him too much to allow that. So I'd had to leave school early and go out among humans, abandoning the world I'd lived in nearly my entire life.

Leaving had also meant abandoning one other thing—or rather, a person: my best friend, Lissa, also known as Vasilisa Dragomir. Lissa was Moroi, the last in a royal line. I'd been slated to be her guardian when we graduated, and my decision to hunt Dimitri had pretty much destroyed that future with her. I'd had no choice but to leave her.

Aside from our friendship, Lissa and I had a unique connection. Each Moroi specializes in a type of elemental magic—earth, air, water, or fire. Until recently, we'd believed there were only those four elements. Then we'd discovered a fifth: spirit.

That was Lissa's element, and with so few spirit users in the world, we hardly knew anything about it. For the most part, it seemed to be tied to psychic powers. Lissa wielded amazing compulsion—the ability to exert her will on almost anyone. She could also heal, and that's where things got a little strange between us. You see, I technically died in the car accident that killed her family. Lissa had brought me back from the world of the dead without realizing it, creating a psychic bond between us. Ever since then, I was always aware of her presence and thoughts. I could tell what she was thinking and feel when she was in trouble. We had also recently discovered I could see ghosts and spirits who hadn't yet left this world, something I found disconcerting and struggled to block out. The whole phenomenon was called being shadow-kissed.

Our shadow-kissed bond made me the ideal choice to protect Lissa, since I would instantly know if she was in trouble. I'd promised to protect her my whole life, but then Dimitri—tall, gorgeous, fierce Dimitri—had changed it all. I'd been faced with that horrible choice: continue to protect Lissa or free Dimitri's soul. Choosing between them had broken my heart, leaving an ache in my chest and tears in my eyes. My parting with Lissa had been agonizing. We'd been best friends since kindergarten, and my departure was a shock for both of us. To be fair, she'd never seen it coming. I'd kept my romance with Dimitri a secret. He was my instructor, seven years older than me, and had been assigned to be her guardian as well. As such, he and I had tried hard to fight our attraction, knowing we had to focus on Lissa more than anything else

and that we'd also get in a fair amount of trouble for our student-teacher relationship.

But being kept from Dimitri—even though I'd agreed to it—had caused me to build up a lot of unspoken resentment toward Lissa. I probably should have talked to her about it and explained my frustration over having my entire life planned out. It didn't seem fair, somehow, that while Lissa was free to live and love however she wanted, I would always have to sacrifice my own happiness to ensure that she was protected. She was my best friend, though, and I couldn't bear the thought of upsetting her. Lissa was particularly vulnerable because using spirit had the nasty side effect of driving people insane. So I'd sat on my feelings until they finally exploded, and I left the Academy—and her—behind for good.

One of the ghosts I'd seen—Mason, a friend who had been killed by Strigoi—had told me Dimitri had returned to his homeland: Siberia. Mason's soul had found peace and left this world shortly thereafter, without giving me any other clues about *where* in Siberia Dimitri might have gone. So I'd had to set out there blindly, braving a world of humans and a language I didn't know in order to fulfill the promise I'd made to myself.

After a few weeks on my own, I had finally made it to Saint Petersburg. I was still looking, still floundering—but determined to find him, even though I dreaded it at the same time. Because if I really did pull this insane plan off, if I actually managed to kill the man I loved, it would mean Dimitri would truly be gone from the world. And I honestly wasn't sure I could go on in a world like that.

None of it seems real. Who knows? Maybe it isn't. Maybe it's actually happening to someone else. Maybe it's something I imagined. Maybe soon I'm going to wake up and find everything fixed with Lissa and Dimitri. We'll all be together, and he'll be there to smile and hold me and tell me everything's going to be okay. Maybe all of this really has been a dream.

But I don't think so.

ONE

IWAS BEING FOLLOWED.

It was kind of ironic, considering the way I'd been following others for the last few weeks. At least it wasn't a Strigoi. I would have already known. A recent effect of my being shadow-kissed was the ability to sense the undead—through bouts of nausea, unfortunately. Still, I appreciated my body's early warning system and was relieved my stalker tonight wasn't an insanely fast, insanely vicious vampire. I'd fought enough of those recently and kind of wanted a night off.

I had to guess my follower was a dhampir like me, probably one from the club. Admittedly, this person was moving a little less stealthily than I would have expected of a dhampir. Footsteps were clearly audible against the pavement of the dark side streets I was traveling on, and once, I'd caught a brief glimpse of a shadowy figure. Still, considering my rash actions tonight, a dhampir was the most likely culprit.

It had all started earlier at the Nightingale. That wasn't the club's true name, only a translation. Its real name was something Russian that was beyond my ability to pronounce. Back in the U.S., the Nightingale was well known among rich Moroi who traveled abroad, and now I could understand why. No matter what time of the day it was, people at the Nightingale dressed like they were at an imperial ball. And, well, the whole place actually kind of looked like something from the old, royal days of Russia, with ivory walls covered in gold scroll-work and molding. It reminded me a lot of the Winter Palace, a royal residence left over from when Russia had still been ruled by czars. I'd toured it upon first arriving in Saint Petersburg.

At the Nightingale, elaborate chandeliers filled with real candles glittered in the air, lighting up the gold décor so that even in dim lighting, the whole establishment sparkled. There was a large dining room filled with velvet-draped tables and booths, as well as a lounge and bar area where people could mingle. Late in the evening, a band would set up in there, and couples would hit the dance floor.

I hadn't bothered with the Nightingale when I arrived in the city a couple weeks ago. I'd been arrogant enough to think I could find Moroi right away who could direct me to Dimitri's hometown in Siberia. With no other clues about where Dimitri had gone in Siberia, heading to the town he'd grown up in had been my best chance of getting closer to him. Only, I didn't know where it was, which was why I was trying to find Moroi to help me. There were a number of dhampir towns and communes in Russia but hardly any in

Siberia, which made me believe most local Moroi would be familiar with his birthplace. Unfortunately, it turned out that the Moroi who lived in human cities were very good at keeping themselves hidden. I checked what I thought were likely Moroi hangouts, only to come up empty. And without those Moroi, I had no answers.

So, I'd begun staking out the Nightingale, which wasn't easy. It was hard for an eighteen-year-old girl to blend into one of the city's most elite clubs. I'd soon found that expensive clothes and large enough tips went a long way toward helping me get by. The waitstaff had come to know me, and if they thought my presence was strange, they didn't say so and were happy to give me the corner table I always asked for. I think they thought I was the daughter of some tycoon or politician. Whatever my background, I had the money to be there, which was all they cared about.

Even so, my first few nights there had been discouraging. The Nightingale might have been an elite hangout for Moroi, but it was also frequented by humans. And at first, it had seemed those were the club's only patrons. Crowds grew larger as the night progressed, and in peering through the packed tables and people lingering at the bar, I'd seen no Moroi. The most notable thing I'd seen was a woman with long, platinum-blond hair walking into the lounge with a group of friends. For a moment, my heart had stopped. The woman had her back to me, but she had looked so much like Lissa that I'd felt certain I'd been tracked down. The weird thing was, I didn't know whether to feel excited or horrified. I missed Lissa so, so much—yet at the same time, I didn't want her involved in this dangerous trip of mine. Then the woman had turned around. It wasn't Lissa. She wasn't even a Moroi, just a human. Slowly, my breathing returned to normal.

Finally, a week or so ago, I'd had my first sighting. A group of Moroi women had come in for a late lunch, accompanied by two guardians, one male and one female, who sat dutifully and quietly at the table as their charges gossiped and laughed over afternoon champagne. Dodging those guardians had been the trickiest part. For those who knew what to look for, Moroi were easy to spot: taller than most humans, pale, and über-slim. They also had a certain funny way of smiling and holding their lips in order to hide their fangs. Dhampirs, with our human blood, appeared . . . well, human.

That was certainly how I looked to the untrained human eye. I was about five foot seven, and whereas Moroi tended to have unreal, runway-model bodies, mine was athletically built and curvy in the chest. Genetics from my unknown Turkish father and too much time in the sun had given me a light tan that paired well with long, nearly black hair and equally dark eyes. But those who had been raised in the Moroi world could spot me as a dhampir through close examination. I'm not sure what it was—maybe some instinct that drew us to our own kind and recognized the mix of Moroi blood.

Regardless, it was imperative that I appear human to those guardians, so I didn't raise their alarms. I sat across the room in my corner, picking over caviar and pretending to read my book. For the record, I thought caviar was disgusting, but it seemed to be everywhere in Russia, particularly in the nice places. That and borscht—a kind of beet soup. I almost never finished my food at the Nightingale and would ravenously hit McDonald's afterward, even

though the Russian McDonald's restaurants were a bit different from what I'd grown up with in the U.S. Still, a girl had to eat.

So it became a test of my skill, studying the Moroi when their guardians weren't watching. Admittedly, the guardians had little to fear during the day, since there would be no Strigoi out in the sun. But it was in guardian nature to watch everything, and their eyes continually swept the room. I'd had the same training and knew their tricks, so I managed to spy without detection.

The women came back a lot, usually late in the afternoon. St. Vladimir's ran on a nocturnal schedule, but Moroi and dhampirs living out among humans either ran on a daylight schedule or something in between. For a while, I'd considered approaching them—or even their guardians. Something held me back. If anyone would know where a town of dhampirs lived, it would be *male* Moroi. Many of them visited dhampir towns in hopes of scoring easy dhampir girls. So I promised myself I'd wait another week to see if any guys came by. If not, I would see what kind of information the women could give me.

At last, a couple days ago, two Moroi guys had started showing up. They tended to come later in the evening, when the real partiers arrived. The men were about ten years older than me and strikingly handsome, wearing designer suits and silk ties. They carried themselves like powerful, important people, and I would have bet good money that they were royal—particularly since each one came with a guardian. The guardians were always the same, young men who wore suits to blend in but still carefully watched the room with that clever guardian nature.

And there were women—always women. The two Moroi were terrible flirts, continually scoping out and hitting on every woman in sight—even humans. But they never went home with any humans. That was a taboo still firmly ingrained in our world. Moroi had kept themselves separate from humans for centuries, fearing detection from a race that had grown so plentiful and powerful.

Still, that didn't mean the men went home alone. At some point in the evening, dhampir women usually showed up—different ones every night. They'd come in wearing low-cut dresses and lots of makeup, drinking heavily and laughing at everything the guys said—which probably wasn't even that funny. The women always wore their hair down, but every once in a while, they'd shift their heads in a way that showed their necks, which were heavily bruised. They were blood whores, dhampirs who let Moroi drink blood during sex. That was also a taboo—though it still happened in secret.

I kept wanting to get one of the Moroi men alone, away from the watchful eyes of his guardians so that I could question him. But it was impossible. The guardians never left their Moroi unattended. I even attempted to follow them, but each time the group left the club, they'd almost immediately hop into a limousine—making it impossible for me to track them on foot. It was frustrating.

I finally decided tonight that I'd have to approach the whole group and risk detection by the dhampirs. I didn't know if anyone from back home was actually looking for me, or if the group would even care who I was. Maybe I just had too high an opinion of myself. It was definitely possible that no one was actually concerned about a runaway dropout. But if anyone *was* looking

for me, my description had undoubtedly been circulated amongst guardians worldwide. Even though I was now eighteen, I wouldn't have put it past some of the people I knew to haul me back to the U.S., and there was no way I could return until I'd found Dimitri.

Then, just as I was considering my move on the group of Moroi, one of the dhampir women left the table to walk up to the bar. The guardians watched her, of course, but seemed confident about her safety and were more fixated on the Moroi. All this time, I'd been thinking Moroi men would be the best way to go to get information about a village of dhampirs and blood whores—but what better way to locate this place than by asking an *actual* blood whore?

I strolled casually from my table and approached the bar, like I too was going to get a drink. I stood by as the woman waited for the bartender and studied her in my periphery. She was blond and wore a long dress covered in silver sequins. I couldn't decide if it made my black satin sheath dress appear tasteful or boring. All of her movements—even the way she stood—were graceful, like a dancer's. The bartender was helping others, and I knew it was now or never. I leaned toward her.

"Do you speak English?"

She jumped in surprise and looked over at me. She was older than I'd expected, her age cleverly concealed by makeup. Her blue eyes assessed me quickly, recognizing me as a dhampir. "Yes," she said warily. Even the one word carried a thick accent.

"I'm looking for a town . . . a town where lots of dhampirs live, out in Siberia. Do you know what I'm talking about? I need to find it."

Again she studied me, and I couldn't read her expression. She might as well have been a guardian for all that her face revealed. Maybe she'd trained at one time in her life.

"Don't," she said bluntly. "Let it go." She turned away, her gaze back on the bartender as he made someone a blue cocktail adorned with cherries.

I touched her arm. "I have to find it. There's a man . . ." I choked on the word. So much for my cool interrogation. Just thinking about Dimitri made my heart stick in my throat. How could I even explain it to this woman? That I was following a long-shot clue, seeking out the man I loved most in the world—a man who had been turned into a Strigoi and who I now needed to kill? Even now, I could perfectly picture the warmth of his brown eyes and the way his hands used to touch me. How could I do what I had crossed an ocean to do?

Focus, Rose. Focus.

The dhampir woman looked back at me. "He's not worth it," she said, mistaking my meaning. No doubt she thought I was a lovesick girl, chasing some boyfriend—which, I supposed, I kind of was. "You're too young . . . it's not too late for you to avoid all that." Her face might have been impassive, but there was sadness in her voice. "Go do something else with your life. Stay away from that place."

"You know where it is!" I exclaimed, too worked up to explain that I wasn't going there to be a blood whore. "Please—you have to tell me. I have to get there!"

"Is there a problem?"

Both she and I turned and looked into the fierce face of one of the guardians. Damn. The dhampir woman might not be their top priority, but they would have noticed someone harassing her. The guardian was only a little older than me, and I gave him a sweet smile. I might not be spilling out of my dress like this other woman, but I knew my short skirt did great things for my legs. Surely even a guardian wasn't immune to that? Well, apparently he was. His hard expression showed that my charms weren't working. Still, I figured I might as well try my luck with him on getting intel.

"I'm trying to find a town in Siberia, a town where dhampirs live. Do you know it?"

He didn't blink. "No."

Wonderful. Both were playing difficult. "Yeah, well, maybe your boss does?" I asked demurely, hoping I sounded like an aspiring blood whore. If the dhampirs wouldn't talk, maybe one of the Moroi would. "Maybe he wants some company and would talk to me."

"He already has company," the guardian replied evenly. "He doesn't need any more."

I kept the smile on. "Are you sure?" I purred. "Maybe we should ask him."

"No," replied the guardian. In that one word, I heard the challenge and the command. *Back off*. He wouldn't hesitate to take on anyone he thought was a threat to his master—even a lowly dhampir girl. I considered pushing my case further but quickly decided to follow the warning and indeed back off.

I gave an unconcerned shrug. "His loss."

And with no other words, I walked casually back to my table, like the rejection was no big deal. All the while I held my breath, half-expecting the guardian to drag me out of the club by my hair. It didn't happen. Yet as I gathered my coat and set some cash on the table, I saw him watching me, eyes wary and calculating.

I left the Nightingale with that same nonchalant air, heading out toward the busy street. It was a Saturday night, and there were lots of other clubs and restaurants nearby. Partygoers filled the streets, some dressed as richly as the Nightingale's patrons; others were my age and dressed in casual wear. Lines spilled out of the clubs, dance music loud and heavy with bass. Glass-fronted restaurants showed elegant diners and richly set tables. As I walked through the crowds, surrounded by Russian conversation, I resisted the urge to look behind me. I didn't want to raise any further suspicion if that dhampir was watching.

Yet when I turned down a quiet street that was a shortcut back to my hotel, I could hear the soft sounds of footsteps. I apparently had raised enough alarm that the guardian had decided to follow me. Well, there was no way I was going to let him get the drop on me. I might have been smaller than him—and wearing a dress and heels—but I had fought plenty of men, including Strigoi. I could handle this guy, especially if I used the element of surprise. After walking this neighborhood for so long, I knew it and its twists and turns well. I picked up my pace and darted around a few corners, one of which led me into a dark, deserted alley. Scary, yeah, but it made for a good ambush spot when I ducked into a doorway. I quietly stepped out of my high-heeled shoes. They were black with pretty leather straps but not ideal in a fight, unless I

planned on gouging someone in the eye with a heel. Actually, not a bad idea. But I wasn't quite that desperate. Without them, the pavement was cold beneath my bare feet since it had rained earlier in the day.

I didn't have to wait long. A few moments later, I heard the footsteps and saw my pursuer's long shadow appear on the ground, cast in the flickering light of a street lamp on the adjacent road. My stalker came to a stop, no doubt searching for me. Really, I thought, this guy was careless. No guardian in pursuit would have been so obvious. He should have moved with more stealth and not revealed himself so easily. Maybe the guardian training here in Russia wasn't as good as what I'd grown up with. No, that couldn't be true. Not with the way Dimitri had dispatched his enemies. They'd called him a god at the Academy.

My pursuer took a few more steps, and that's when I made my move. I leapt out, fists ready. "Okay," I exclaimed. "I only wanted to ask a few questions, so just back off or else—"

I froze. The guardian from the club wasn't standing there.

A human was.

A girl, no older than me. She was about my height, with cropped dark blond hair and a navy blue trench coat that looked expensive. Underneath it, I could see nice dress pants and leather boots that looked as pricey as the coat. More startling still was that I recognized her. I'd seen her twice at the Nightingale, talking to the Moroi men. I'd assumed she was just another of the women they liked to flirt with and had promptly dismissed her. After all, what use was a human to me?

Her face was partly covered in shadow, but even in poor lighting, I could make out her annoyed expression. That wasn't quite what I'd expected. "It's you, isn't it?" she asked. Cue more shock. Her English was as American as my own. "You're the one who's been leaving the string of Strigoi bodies around the city. I saw you back in the club tonight and knew it had to be you."

"I . . ." No other words formed on my lips. I had no idea how to respond. A human talking casually about Strigoi? It was unheard of. This was almost more astonishing than actually running into a Strigoi out here. I'd never experienced anything like this in my life. She didn't seem to care about my stupefied state.

"Look, you can't just do that, okay? Do you know what a pain in the ass it is for me to deal with? This internship is bad enough without you making a mess of it. The police found the body you left in the park, you know. You *cannot* even imagine how many strings I had to pull to cover that up."

"Who . . . who are you?" I asked at last. It was true. I *had* left a body in the park, but seriously, what was I supposed to do? Drag him back to my hotel and tell the bellhop my friend had had too much to drink?

"Sydney," the girl said wearily. "My name's Sydney. I'm the Alchemist assigned here."

"The what?"

She sighed loudly, and I was pretty sure she rolled her eyes. "Of course. That explains everything."

"No, not really," I said, finally regaining my composure. "In fact, I think you're the one who has a lot of explaining to do."

“And attitude too. Are you some kind of test they sent here for me? Oh, man. That’s it.”

I was getting angry now. I didn’t like being chastised. I certainly didn’t like being chastised by a human who made it sound like me killing Strigoi was a bad thing.

“Look, I don’t know who you are or how you know about any of this, but I’m not going to stand here and—”

Nausea rolled over me and I tensed, my hand immediately going for the silver stake I kept in my coat pocket. Sydney still wore that annoyed expression, but it was mingled with confusion now at the abrupt change in my posture. She was observant, I’d give her that.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“You’re going to have another body to deal with,” I said, just as the Strigoi attacked her.

TWO

GOING FOR HER INSTEAD OF me was bad form on the Strigoi's part. I was the threat; he should have neutralized me first. Our positioning had put Sydney in his way, however, so he had to dispatch her before he could get to me. He grabbed her shoulder, jerking her to him. He was fast—they always were—but I was on my game tonight.

A swift kick knocked him into a neighboring building's wall and freed Sydney from his grasp. He grunted on impact and slumped to the ground, stunned and surprised. It wasn't easy to get the drop on a Strigoi, not with their lightning-fast reflexes. Abandoning Sydney, he focused his attention on me, red eyes angry and lips curled back to show his fangs. He sprang up from his fall with that preternatural speed and lunged for me. I dodged him and attempted a punch that he dodged in return. His next blow caught me on the arm, and I stumbled, just barely keeping my balance. My stake was still clutched in my right hand, but I needed an opening to hit his chest. A smart Strigoi would have angled himself in a way that ruined the line of sight to his heart. This guy was only doing a so-so job, and if I could stay alive long enough, I'd likely get an opening.

Just then, Sydney came up and hit him on the back. It wasn't a very strong blow, but it startled him. It was my opening. I sprinted as hard as I could, throwing my full weight at him. My stake pierced his heart as we slammed against the wall. It was as simple as that. The life—or undead life or whatever—faded away from him. He stopped moving. I jerked out my stake once I was certain he was dead and watched as his body crumpled to the ground.

Just like with every Strigoi I'd killed lately, I had a momentary surreal feeling. *What if this had been Dimitri?* I tried to imagine Dimitri's face on this Strigoi, tried to imagine him lying before me. My heart twisted in my chest. For a split second, the image was there. Then—gone. This was just some random Strigoi.

I promptly shook the disorientation off and reminded myself that I had important things to worry about here. I had to check on Sydney. Even with a human, my protective nature couldn't help but kick in. "Are you okay?"

She nodded, looking shaken but otherwise unharmed. "Nice work," she said. She sounded as though she were forcibly trying to sound confident. "I've never . . . I've never actually seen one of them killed. . . ."

I couldn't imagine how she would have, but then, I didn't get how she knew about any of this stuff in the first place. She looked like she was in shock, so I took her arm and started to lead her away. "Come on, let's get out to where

there's more people." Strigoi lurking near the Nightingale wasn't that crazy of an idea, the more I thought about it. What better place to stalk Moroi than at one of their hangouts? Though, hopefully, most guardians would have enough sense to keep their charges out of alleys like this.

The suggestion of departure snapped Sydney out of her daze. "What?" she exclaimed. "You're just going to leave him too?"

I threw up my hands. "What do you expect me to do? I guess I can move him behind those trash cans and then let the sun incinerate him. That's what I usually do."

"Right. And what if someone shows up to take out the trash? Or comes out of one of these back doors?"

"Well, I can hardly drag him off. Or set him on fire. A vampire barbecue would kind of attract some attention, don't you think?"

Sydney shook her head in exasperation and walked over to the body. She made a face as she looked down at the Strigoi and reached into her large leather purse. From it, she produced a small vial. With a deft motion, she sprinkled the vial's contents over the body and then quickly stepped back. Where the drops had hit his corpse, yellow smoke began to curl away. The smoke slowly moved outward, spreading horizontally rather than vertically until it cocooned the Strigoi entirely. Then it contracted and contracted until it was nothing but a fist-size ball. In a few seconds, the smoke drifted off entirely, leaving an innocuous pile of dust behind.

"You're welcome," said Sydney flatly, still giving me a disapproving look.

"What the hell was that?" I exclaimed.

"My job. Can you please call me the next time this happens?" She started to turn away.

"Wait! I can't call you—I have no idea who you are."

She glanced back at me and brushed blond hair out of her face. "Really? You're serious, aren't you? I thought you were all taught about us when you graduated."

"Oh, well. Funny thing . . . I kind of, uh, didn't graduate."

Sydney's eyes widened. "You took down one of those . . . things . . . but never graduated?"

I shrugged, and she remained silent for several seconds.

Finally, she sighed again and said, "I guess we need to talk."

Did we ever. Meeting her had to be the strangest thing that had happened to me since coming to Russia. I wanted to know why she thought I should have been in contact with her and how she'd dissolved that Strigoi corpse. And, as we returned to the busy streets and walked toward a café she liked, it occurred to me that if she knew about the Moroi world, there might be a chance she also knew where Dimitri's village was.

Dimitri. There he was again, popping back into my mind. I had no clue if he really would be lurking near his hometown, but I had nothing else to go on at this point. Again, that weird feeling came over me. My mind blurred Dimitri's face with that of the Strigoi I'd just killed: pale skin, red-ringed eyes . . . .

No, I sternly told myself. *Don't focus on that yet. Don't panic.* Until I faced Dimitri the Strigoi, I would gain the most strength from remembering the Dimitri I loved, with his deep brown eyes, warm hands, fierce embrace . . . .

“Are you okay . . . um, whatever your name is?”

Sydney was staring at me strangely, and I realized we’d come to a halt in front of a restaurant. I didn’t know what look I wore on my face, but it must have been enough to raise even her attention. Until now, my impression as we walked had been that she wanted to speak to me as little as possible.

“Yeah, yeah, fine,” I said brusquely, putting on my guardian face. “And I’m Rose. Is this the place?”

It was. The restaurant was bright and cheery, albeit a far cry from the Nightingale’s opulence. We slid into a black leather—by which I mean fake plastic leather—booth, and I was delighted to see the menu had both American and Russian food. The listings were translated into English, and I nearly drooled when I saw fried chicken. I was starving after not eating at the club, and the thought of deep-fried meat was luxurious after weeks of cabbage dishes and so-called McDonald’s.

A waitress arrived, and Sydney ordered in fluent Russian, whereas I just pointed at the menu. Huh. Sydney was just full of surprises. Considering her harsh attitude, I expected her to interrogate me right away, but when the waitress left, Sydney remained quiet, simply playing with her napkin and avoiding eye contact. It was so strange. She was definitely uncomfortable around me. Even with the table between us, it was like she couldn’t get far enough away. Yet her earlier outrage hadn’t been faked, and she’d been adamant about me following whatever these rules of hers were.

Well, she might have been playing coy, but I had no such hesitation about busting into uncomfortable topics. In fact, it was kind of my trademark.

“So, are you ready to tell me who you are and what’s going on?”

Sydney looked up. Now that we were in brighter light, I could see that her eyes were brown. I also noticed that she had an interesting tattoo on her lower left cheek. The ink looked like gold, something I’d never seen before. It was an elaborate design of flowers and leaves and was only really visible when she tilted her head certain ways so that the gold caught the light.

“I told you,” she said. “I’m an Alchemist.”

“And I told you, I don’t know what that is. Is it some Russian word?” It didn’t sound like one.

A half-smile played on her lips. “No. I take it you’ve never heard of alchemy either?”

I shook my head, and she propped her chin up with her hand, eyes staring down at the table again. She swallowed, like she was bracing herself, and then a rush of words came out. “Back in the Middle Ages, there were these people who were convinced that if they found the right formula or magic, they could turn lead into gold. Unsurprisingly, they couldn’t. This didn’t stop them from pursuing all sorts of other mystical and supernatural stuff, and eventually they did find something magical.” She frowned. “Vampires.”

I thought back to my Moroi history classes. The Middle Ages were when our kind really started pulling away from humans, hiding out and keeping to ourselves. That was the time when vampires truly became myth as far as the rest of the world was concerned, and even Moroi were regarded as monsters worth hunting.

Sydney verified my thoughts. “And that was when the Moroi began to stay

away. They had their magic, but humans were starting to outnumber them. We still do." That almost brought a smile to her face. Moroi sometimes had trouble conceiving, whereas humans seemed to have too easy a time. "And the Moroi made a deal with the Alchemists. If the Alchemists would help Moroi and dhampirs and their societies stay secret from humans, the Moroi would give us these." She touched the golden tattoo.

"What is that?" I asked. "I mean, aside from the obvious."

She gently stroked it with her fingertips and didn't bother hiding the sarcasm when she spoke. "My guardian angel. It's actually gold and"—she grimaced and dropped her hand—"Moroi blood, charmed with water and earth."

"What?" My voice came out too loud, and some people in the restaurant turned to look at me. Sydney continued speaking, her tone much lower—and very bitter.

"I'm not thrilled about it, but it's our 'reward' for helping you guys. The water and earth bind it to our skin and give us the same traits Moroi have—well, a couple of them. I almost never get sick. I'll live a long life."

"I guess that sounds good," I said uncertainly.

"Maybe for some. We don't have a choice. This 'career' is a family thing—it gets passed down. We all have to learn about Moroi and dhampirs. We work connections among humans that let us cover up for you since we can move around more freely. We've got tricks and techniques to get rid of Strigoi bodies—like that potion you saw. In return, though, we want to stay apart from you as much as we can—which is why most dhampirs aren't told about us until they graduate. And Moroi hardly ever." She abruptly stopped. I guessed the lesson was over.

My head was reeling. I had never, never considered anything like this—wait. Had I? Most of my education had emphasized the physical aspects of being a guardian: watchfulness, combat, etc. Yet every so often I'd heard vague references to those out in the human world who would help hide Moroi or get them out of weird and dangerous situations. I'd never thought much about it or heard the term *Alchemist*. If I had stayed in school, maybe I would have.

This probably wasn't an idea I should have suggested, but my nature couldn't help it. "Why keep the charm to yourselves? Why not share it with the human world?"

"Because there's an extra part to its power. It stops us from speaking about your kind in a way that would endanger or expose them."

A charm that bound them from speaking . . . that sounded suspiciously like compulsion. All Moroi could use compulsion a little, and most could put some of their magic into objects to give them certain properties. Moroi magic had changed over the years, and compulsion was regarded as an immoral thing now. I was guessing this tattoo was an old, old spell that had come down through the centuries.

I replayed the rest of what Sydney had said, more questions spinning in my head. "Why . . . why do you want to stay away from us? I mean, not that I'm looking to become BFFs or anything . . . ."

"Because it's our duty to God to protect the rest of humanity from evil

creatures of the night." Absentmindedly, her hand went to something at her neck. It was mostly covered by her jacket, but a parting of her collar briefly revealed a golden cross.

My initial reaction to that was unease, seeing as I wasn't very religious. In fact, I was never entirely comfortable around those who were hard-core believers. Thirty seconds later, the full impact of the rest of her words sank in.

"Wait a minute," I exclaimed indignantly. "Are you talking about all of us—dhampirs and Moroi? We're *all* evil creatures of the night?"

Her hands dropped from the cross, and she didn't respond.

"We're not like Strigoi!" I snapped.

Her face stayed bland. "Moroi drink blood. Dhampirs are the unnatural offspring of them and humans."

No one had ever called me unnatural before, except for the time I put ketchup on a taco. But seriously, we'd been out of salsa, so what else was I supposed to do? "Moroi and dhampirs are *not* evil," I told Sydney. "Not like Strigoi."

"That's true," she conceded. "Strigoi are *more* evil."

"Hey, that's not what I—"

The food arrived just then, and the fried chicken was almost enough to distract me from the outrage of being compared to a Strigoi. Mostly all it did was delay me from responding immediately to her claims, and I bit into the golden crust and nearly melted then and there. Sydney had ordered a cheeseburger and fries and nibbled her food delicately.

After taking down an entire chicken leg, I was finally able to resume the argument. "We're not like Strigoi at all. Moroi don't kill. You have no reason to be afraid of us." Again, I wasn't keen on cozying up to humans. None of my kind were, not with the way humans tended to be trigger-happy and ready to experiment on anything they didn't understand.

"Any human who learns about you will inevitably learn about Strigoi," she said. She was playing with her fries but not actually eating them.

"Knowing about Strigoi might enable humans to protect themselves, though." Why the hell was I playing devil's advocate here?

She finished toying with a fry and dropped it back on her plate. "Perhaps. But there are a lot of people who would be tempted by the thought of immortality—even at the cost of serving Strigoi in exchange for being turned into a creature from hell. You'd be surprised at how a lot of humans respond when they learn about vampires. Immortality's a big draw—despite the evil that goes with it. A lot of humans who learn about Strigoi will try to serve them, in the hopes of eventually being turned."

"That's insane—" I stopped. Last year, we'd discovered evidence of humans helping Strigoi. Strigoi couldn't touch silver stakes, but humans could, and some had used those stakes to shatter Moroi wards. Had those humans been promised immortality?

"And so," said Sydney, "that's why it's best if we just make sure no one knows about any of you. You're out there—all of you—and there's nothing to be done about it. You do your thing to get rid of Strigoi, and we'll do ours and save the rest of my kind."

I chewed on a chicken wing and restrained myself from the implied

meaning that she was saving her kind from people like me, too. In some ways, what she was saying made sense. It wasn't possible that we could always move through the world invisibly, and yes, I could admit, it was necessary for someone to dispose of Strigoi bodies. Humans working with Moroi were an ideal choice. Such humans would be able to move around the world freely, particularly if they had the kinds of contacts and connections she kept implying.

I froze mid-chew, remembering my earlier thoughts when I'd first come along with Sydney. I forced myself to swallow and then took a long drink of water. "Here's a question. Do you have contacts all over Russia?"

"Unfortunately," she said. "When Alchemists turn eighteen, we're sent on an internship to get firsthand experience in the trade and make all sorts of connections. I would have rather stayed in Utah."

That was almost crazier than everything else she'd told me, but I didn't push it. "What kind of connections exactly?"

She shrugged. "We track the movements of a lot of Moroi and dhampirs. We also know a lot of high-ranking government officials—among humans and Moroi. If there's been a vampire sighting among humans, we can usually find someone important who can pay someone off or whatever. . . . It all gets swept under the rug."

Track the movements of a lot of Moroi and dhampirs. Jackpot. I leaned in close and lowered my voice. Everything seemed to hinge on this moment.

"I'm looking for a village . . . a village of dhampirs out in Siberia. I don't know its name." Dimitri had only ever mentioned its name once, and I'd forgotten. "It's kind of near . . . Om?"

"Omsk," she corrected.

I straightened up. "Do you know it?"

She didn't answer right away, but her eyes betrayed her. "Maybe."

"You do!" I exclaimed. "You have to tell me where it is. I have to get there."

She made a face. "Are you going to be . . . one of *those*?"

So Alchemists knew about blood whores. No surprise. If Sydney and her associates knew everything else about the vampire world, they'd know this too.

"No," I said haughtily. "I just have to find someone."

"Who?"

"Someone."

That almost made her smile. Her brown eyes were thoughtful as she munched on another fry. She'd only taken two bites out of her cheeseburger, and it was rapidly growing cold. I kind of wanted to eat it myself on principle.

"I'll be right back," she said abruptly. She stood up and strode across to a quiet corner of the café. Producing a cell phone from that magic purse of hers, she turned her back to the room and made a call.

I'd polished off my chicken by then and helped myself to some of her fries since it was looking less and less like she was going to do anything with them. As I ate, I pondered the possibilities before me, wondering if finding Dimitri's town would really be this simple. And once I was there . . . would it be simple then? Would he be there, living in the shadows and hunting prey? And when faced with him, could I really drive my stake into his heart? That unwanted

image came to me again, Dimitri with red eyes and—

"Rose?"

I blinked. I'd totally spaced out, and Sydney was back. She slid back into her spot across from me. "So, it looks like—" She paused and looked down. "Did you eat some of my fries?"

I had no clue how she knew, seeing as it was such a huge stack. I'd barely made a dent. Figuring me stealing fries would count as further evidence of being an evil creature of the night, I said glibly, "No."

She frowned a moment, considering, and then said, "I do know where this town is. I've been there before."

I straightened up. Holy crap. This was actually going to happen, after all these weeks of searching. Sydney would tell me where this place was, and I could go and try to close this horrible chapter in my life.

"Thank you, thank you so much—"

She held up a hand to silence me, and I noticed then how miserable she looked.

"But I'm not going to tell you where it is."

My mouth gaped. "What?"

"I'm going to take you there myself."

THREE

"AH—WHAT?" I EXCLAIMED.

That wasn't in the plan. That wasn't in the plan at all. I was trying to move through Russia in as incognito a way as possible. Plus, I didn't really relish the thought of having a tagalong—particularly one who appeared to hate me. I didn't know how long it would take to get to Siberia—a couple days, I thought—and I couldn't imagine spending them listening to Sydney talk about what an unnatural, evil being I was.

Swallowing my outrage, I attempted reason. After all, I was asking a favor here. "That's not necessary," I said, forcing a smile. "It's nice of you to offer, but I don't want to inconvenience you."

"Well," she replied dryly, "there's no getting around *that*. And it's not me being nice. It's not even my choice. It's an order from my superiors."

"It still sounds like a pain in the ass for you. Why don't you just tell me where it is and blow them off?"

"You obviously don't know the people I work for."

"Don't need to. I ignore authority all the time. It's not hard once you get used to it."

"Yeah? How's that working out for you with finding this village?" she asked mockingly. "Look, if you want to get there, this is the only way."

Well—it was the only way I could get there if I used Sydney for information. I could always go back to staking out the Nightingale . . . but it had taken me this long to get a lead from there. Meanwhile, she was here right in front of me with the information I needed.

"Why?" I asked. "Why do you have to go too?"

"I can't tell you that. Bottom line: They told me to."

Lovely. I eyed her, trying to figure out what was going on here. Why on earth would anyone—let alone humans with their hands in the Moroi world—care where one teenage dhampir went? I didn't think Sydney had any ulterior motives—unless she was a very, very good actress. Yet, clearly the people she answered to had an agenda, and I didn't like playing into anyone's plan. At the same time, I was anxious to get on with this. Each day that passed was another in which I didn't find Dimitri.

"How soon can we leave?" I asked at last. Sydney, I decided, was a paper-pusher. She'd shown no real skill in tracking me earlier. Surely it wouldn't be that hard to ditch her once we were near enough to Dimitri's town.

She looked kind of disappointed at my response, almost as though she'd hoped I would decline and then she'd be off the hook. She didn't want to come

with me any more than I wanted her to. Opening her purse, she took out her cell phone again, fiddled with it a couple of minutes, and finally produced some train times. She showed me the schedule for the next day.

"Does that work for you?"

I studied the screen and nodded. "I know where that station is. I can be there."

"Okay." She stood up and tossed some cash on the table. "I'll see you tomorrow." She started to walk away and then glanced back at me. "Oh, and you can have the rest of my fries."

When I first came to Russia, I stayed in youth hostels. I'd certainly had the money to stay elsewhere, but I wanted to remain under the radar. Besides, luxury hadn't really been the first thing on my mind. When I began going to the Nightingale, however, I found I could hardly return to a boarding house of backpacking students while wearing a designer dress.

So I was now staying at a posh hotel, complete with guys who always held the doors open and a marble-floored lobby. That lobby was so big that I think an entire hostel could have fit in it. Maybe two hostels. My room was large and overdone too, and I was grateful to reach it and change out of the heels and dress. I realized with only a small pang of regret that I'd have to leave the dresses I'd bought in Saint Petersburg behind. I wanted to keep my luggage light while jaunting around the country, and even if my backpack was large, there was only so much I could carry. Oh well. Those dresses would make some cleaning woman's day, no doubt. The only bit of ornamentation I really needed was my *nazar*, a pendant that looked like a blue eye. It had been a gift from my mother, which had in turn been a gift from my father. I always wore it around my neck.

Our train for Moscow left late in the morning, and we would then catch a cross-country train to Siberia. I wanted to be well rested and ready for it all. Once in my pajamas, I snuggled under the bed's heavy comforter and hoped sleep would come soon. Instead, my mind spun with all the things that had happened recently. The Sydney situation was a bizarre twist but one I could handle. As long as we stuck to public transportation, she could hardly lead me into the clutches of her mysterious superiors. And from what she'd said about our travel time, it would indeed only take a couple of days or so to reach the village. Two days seemed both impossibly long and impossibly short.

It meant I could very well be confronting Dimitri in a few days . . . and then what? Could I do it? Could I bring myself to kill him? And even if I decided I could, would I actually have the skill to overpower him? The same questions that I'd been asking myself for the last two weeks kept plaguing me over and over. Dimitri had taught me everything I knew, and with enhanced Strigoi reflexes, he would truly be the god I'd always joked he was. Death was a very real possibility for me.

But worrying wasn't helpful right now and, looking over at the clock in the room, I discovered I'd been lying awake for almost an hour. That was no good. I needed to be in peak condition. So I did something I knew I shouldn't do, but which always worked to get my mind off my worries—largely because it involved me being in someone else's mind.

Slipping inside Lissa's head required only a small amount of concentration on my part. I hadn't known if I could do it when we were far apart, but I'd discovered the process was no different than if I were standing right beside her.

It was late morning back in Montana, and Lissa had no classes today since it was Saturday. During my time away, I'd worked very hard to put up mental walls between us, almost completely blocking her and her feelings out. Now, inside her, all the barriers were down, and her emotions hit me like a tidal wave. She was pissed off. Really pissed off.

"Why does she think she can just snap her fingers and get me to go anywhere she wants, anytime she wants?" Lissa growled.

"Because she's the queen. And because you made a deal with the devil."

Lissa and her boyfriend, Christian, were lounging in the attic of the school's chapel. As soon as I recognized the surroundings, I nearly pulled out of her head. The two of them had had way too many "romantic" encounters up here, and I didn't want to stick around if clothes were going to be ripped off soon. Fortunately—or perhaps not—her annoyed feelings told me there'd be no sex today, not with her bad mood.

It was kind of ironic, actually. Their roles were reversed. Lissa was the raging one while Christian remained cool and collected, trying to appear calm for her sake. He sat on the floor, leaning up against the wall, while she sat in front of him, his legs apart and his arms holding her. She rested her head on his chest and sighed.

"For the last few weeks, I've done everything she's asked! 'Vasilisa, please show this stupid visiting royal around campus.' 'Vasilisa, please jump on a plane for the weekend so that I can introduce you to some boring officials here at Court.' 'Vasilisa, please put in some volunteer time with the younger students. It looks good.'" Despite Lissa's frustration, I couldn't help a little amusement. She had Queen Tatiana's voice down perfectly.

"You would have done that last one willingly," Christian pointed out.

"Yeah . . . the point being *willingly*. I hate her trying to dictate every part of my life lately."

Christian leaned over and kissed her cheek. "Like I said, you made a deal with the devil. You're her darling now. She wants to make sure you're making her look good."

Lissa scowled. Although Moroi lived inside human-run countries and were subject to those governments, they were also ruled by a king or queen who came from one of the twelve royal Moroi families. Queen Tatiana—an Ivashkov—was the current ruler, and she'd taken a particular interest in Lissa as the last living member of the Dragomir family. As such, Tatiana had cut Lissa a deal. If Lissa lived at Court after graduating from St. Vladimir's, the queen would arrange for her to attend Lehigh University in Pennsylvania. Lissa was a total brain and thought living in Tatiana's household would be worth it to attend a semi-big, prestigious university, as opposed to the tiny ones Moroi usually went to (for safety reasons).

As Lissa was finding out, though, the strings attached to that deal were already in place now. "And I just sit and take it," Lissa said. "I just smile and say 'Yes, your majesty. Anything you want, your majesty.'"

"Then tell her the deal's off. You'll be eighteen in a couple of months. Royal or not, you're under no obligations. You don't need her to go to a big school. We'll just take off, you and me. Go to whatever college you want. Or don't go to college at all. We can run off to Paris or something and work at a little café. Or sell bad art on the streets."

This actually made Lissa laugh, and she snuggled closer to Christian. "Right. I can totally see you having the patience to wait on people. You'd be fired your first day. Looks like the only way we'll survive is if I go to college and support us."

"There are other ways to get to college, you know."

"Yeah, but not to any that are this good," she said wistfully. "Not easily, at least. This is the only way. I just wish I could have all this and stand up to her a little. Rose would."

"Rose would have gotten herself arrested for treason the first time Tatiana asked her to do something."

Lissa smiled sadly. "Yeah. She would have." The smile turned into a sigh. "I miss her so much."

Christian kissed her again. "I know." This was a familiar conversation for them, one that never grew old because Lissa's feelings for me never faded. "She's okay, you know. Wherever she is, she's okay."

Lissa stared off into the attic's darkness. The only light came from a stained-glass window that made the whole place look like a fairyland. The space had been recently cleaned out—by Dimitri and me, actually. It had only been a couple of months ago, but already, dust and boxes were accumulating once more. The priest here was a nice guy but kind of a pack rat. Lissa noticed none of this, though. Her thoughts were too focused on me.

"I hope so. I wish I had some idea—any idea—where she is. I keep thinking that if anything happened to her, if she—" Lissa couldn't finish the thought. "Well, I keep thinking that I'd *know* somehow. That I'd feel it. I mean, I know the bond's one-way . . . that's never changed. But I'd have to know if something happened to her, right?"

"I don't know," said Christian. "Maybe. Maybe not." Any other guy would have said something overly sweet and comforting, assuring her that yes, yes, *of course* she'd know. But it was part of Christian's nature to be brutally honest. Lissa liked that about him. So did I. It didn't always make him a pleasant friend, but at least you knew he wasn't bullshitting you.

She sighed again. "Adrian says she's okay. He visits her dreams. I'd give anything to be able to do that. My healing's getting better and better, and I've got the aura thing down. But no dreams yet."

Knowing Lissa missed me hurt almost more than if she'd completely written me off. I'd never wanted to hurt her. Even when I'd resented her for feeling like she was controlling my life, I'd never hated her. I loved her like a sister and couldn't stand the thought of her suffering now on my behalf. How had things gotten so screwed up between us?

She and Christian continued sitting there in comfortable silence, drawing strength and love from each other. They had what Dimitri and I had had, a sense of such oneness and familiarity that words often weren't needed. He ran his fingers through her hair, and while I couldn't see it so well through her

own eyes, I could imagine the way that pale hair would gleam in the rainbow light of the stained-glass windows. He tucked several long locks behind her ear and then tipped her head back, bringing his lips down to hers. The kiss started off light and sweet and then slowly intensified, warmth spreading from his mouth to hers.

Uh-oh, I thought. It might be time to take off after all. But she ended it before I had to.

"It's time," she said regretfully. "We've got to go."

The look in Christian's crystal-blue eyes said otherwise. "Maybe this is the perfect time for you to stand up to the queen. You should just stay here—it'd be a great way to build character."

Lissa lightly elbowed him and then planted a kiss on his forehead before standing up. "That is *not* why you want me to stay, so don't even try to play me."

They left the chapel, and Christian mumbled something about wanting to do more than play that earned him another elbow. They were heading toward the administration building, which was in the heart of the upper school's campus. Aside from the first blushes of spring, everything looked like it had when I'd left—at least on the outside. The stone buildings remained grand and imposing. The tall, ancient trees continued their watch. Yet, inside the hearts of the staff and students, things had changed. Everyone carried scars from the attack. Many of our people had been killed, and while classes were up and running again, everyone still grieved.

Lissa and Christian reached their destination: the administration building. She didn't know the reason for her summoning, only that Tatiana had wanted her to meet some royal guy who had just arrived at the Academy. Considering how many people Tatiana was always forcing her to meet lately, Lissa didn't think too much of it. She and Christian stepped inside the main office, where they found Headmistress Kirova sitting and chatting with an older Moroi and a girl about our age.

"Ah, Miss Dragomir. There you are."

I'd gotten in trouble with Kirova a lot while I'd been a student, yet seeing her now made me feel kind of nostalgic. Getting suspended for starting a fight in class seemed worlds better than traipsing through Siberia to find Dimitri. Kirova had the same birdlike appearance she'd always had, the same glasses balanced at the end of her nose. The man and girl stood up, and Kirova gestured to them.

"This is Eugene Lazar and his daughter Avery." Kirova turned back toward Lissa. "This is Vasilisa Dragomir and Christian Ozera."

A fair bit of sizing up went on then. Lazar was a royal name, but that was no surprise since Tatiana had initiated this meeting. Mr. Lazar gave Lissa a winning smile as he shook her hand. He seemed a bit surprised to meet Christian, but the smile stayed. Of course, that kind of reaction to Christian wasn't so unusual.

The two ways to become Strigoi were by choice or by force. A Strigoi could turn another person—human, Moroi, or dhampir—by drinking their blood and then feeding Strigoi blood back to them. That was what had happened to Dimitri. The other way to become Strigoi was unique to Moroi—and it was

done by choice. Moroi who purposely chose to kill a person by drinking blood would also turn Strigoi. Usually, Moroi only drank small, nonlethal amounts from willing humans. But taking so much that it destroyed another's life force? Well, that turned Moroi to the dark side, taking away their elemental magic and transforming them into the twisted undead.

That was exactly what Christian's parents had done. They'd willingly killed and become Strigoi to gain eternal life. Christian had never shown any desire to become Strigoi, but everyone acted as though he were about to. (Admittedly, his snarky attitude didn't always help.) A lot of his close family—despite being royal—had been unfairly shunned as well. He and I had teamed up to kick a fair amount of Strigoi ass during the attack, though. Word of that was getting around and improving his reputation.

Kirova was never one to waste time with formalities, so she got straight to the point. "Mr. Lazar is going to be the new headmaster here."

Lissa had still been smiling at him politely, but her head immediately jerked toward Kirova. "*What?*"

"I'm going to be stepping down," explained Kirova, voice flat and emotionless enough to rival any guardian's. "Though I'll still be serving the school as a teacher."

"*You're* going to teach?" Christian asked incredulously.

She gave him a dry look. "Yes, Mr. Ozera. It was what I originally went to school for. I'm sure if I try hard enough, I can remember how to do it."

"But why?" asked Lissa. "You do a great job."

It was more or less true. Despite my disputes with Kirova—usually over me breaking rules—I still had a healthy respect for her. Lissa did too.

"It's something I've thought about returning to for some time," explained Kirova. "Now seemed as good a time as any, and Mr. Lazar is a very capable administrator."

Lissa was pretty good at reading people. I think it was part of spirit's side effects, along with how spirit made its users very, very charismatic. Lissa thought Kirova was lying, and so did I. If I'd been able to read Christian's mind, my guess would have been that he felt the same way. The attack on the Academy had sent a lot of people into a panic, royals in particular, even though the problem that had led to the attack had long since been fixed. I was guessing that Tatiana's hand was at work here, forcing Kirova to step down and have a royal take her place, thus making other royals feel better.

Lissa didn't let her thoughts show, and she turned back to Mr. Lazar. "Well, it's very nice to meet you. I'm sure you'll do a great job. Let me know if there's anything I can do for you." She was playing the proper princess role perfectly. Being polite and sweet was one of her many talents.

"Actually," said Mr. Lazar, "there is." He had a deep, booming voice, the kind that filled a room. He gestured toward his daughter. "I was wondering if you could show Avery around and help her find her way here. She graduated last year but will be assisting me in my duties. I'm sure she'd much rather be spending time with someone her own age, however."

Avery smiled, and for the first time, Lissa really paid attention to her. Avery was beautiful. Stunning. Lissa was beautiful too, between that gorgeous hair and the jade green eyes that ran in her family. I thought she was a hundred

times prettier than Avery, but beside the older girl, Lissa felt kind of plain. Avery was tall and slim like most Moroi but had a few sexy curves thrown in. That kind of chest, like mine, was coveted among Moroi, and her long brown hair and blue-gray eyes completed the package.

"I promise not to be too much of a pain," said Avery. "And if you want, I'll give you some insider's tips on Court life. I hear you're going to be moving there."

Instantly, Lissa's defenses went up. She realized what was going on. Not only had Tatiana ousted Kirova, she'd sent a keeper for Lissa. A beautiful, perfect companion who could spy on Lissa and attempt to train her up to Tatiana's standards. Lissa's words were perfectly polite when she spoke, but there was a definite edge of frost in her voice.

"That'd be great," she said. "I'm pretty busy lately, but we can try to make the time."

Neither Avery's father nor Kirova seemed to notice the *back off* subtext, but something flashed in Avery's eyes that told Lissa the message had come through.

"Thanks," said Avery. Unless I was mistaken, there was some legitimate hurt in her face. "I'm sure we'll figure something out."

"Good, good," said Mr. Lazar, totally oblivious to the girl drama. "Maybe you can show Avery to guest housing? She's staying in the east wing."

"Sure," said Lissa, wishing she could do anything but that.

She, Christian, and Avery started to leave, but just then, two guys entered the room. One was a Moroi, a little younger than us, and the other was a dhampir in his twenties—a guardian, from the look of his hard, serious features.

"Ah, there you are," said Mr. Lazar, beckoning the guys in. He rested his hand on the boy's shoulder. "This is my son Reed. He's a junior and will be attending classes here. He's very excited about it."

Actually, Reed looked extremely unexcited. He was pretty much the surliest guy I'd ever seen. If I ever needed to play the role of a disgruntled teen, I could have learned everything there was to know about it from Reed Lazar. He had the same good looks and features as Avery, but they were marred by a grimace that seemed permanently attached to his face. Mr. Lazar introduced the others to Reed. Reed's only response was a guttural, "Hey."

"And this is Simon, Avery's guardian," continued Mr. Lazar. "Of course, while on campus, he doesn't need to be with her all the time. You know how it goes. Still, I'm sure you'll see him around."

I hoped not. He didn't look as completely unpleasant as Reed, but he had a certain dour nature that seemed extreme even among guardians. Suddenly, I kind of felt sorry for Avery. If this was her only company, I'd want to befriend someone like Lissa pretty badly. Lissa, however, made it clear that she wouldn't be part of Tatiana's schemes. With little conversation, she and Christian escorted Avery to guest housing and promptly left. Normally, Lissa would have stayed to help Avery get settled and offered to eat with her later. Not this time. Not with ulterior motives afoot.

I came back to my own body, back in the hotel. I knew I shouldn't care

about Academy life anymore and that I should even feel bad for Avery. Yet lying there and staring into the darkness, I couldn't help but take some smug—and yes, very selfish—satisfaction out of this encounter: Lissa wouldn't be shopping for a new best friend anytime soon.

FOUR

AT ANY OTHER TIME in my life, I would have loved exploring Moscow. Sydney had planned our trip so that when our train arrived there, we'd have a few hours before we had to board the next one to Siberia. This gave us some time to wander around and grab dinner, though she wanted to make sure we were safely inside the station before it grew too dark out. Despite my badass claims or my *molnija* marks, she didn't want to take any chances.

It made no difference to me how we spent our downtime. So long as I was getting closer to Dimitri, that was all that mattered. So Sydney and I walked aimlessly, taking in the sights and saying very little. I had never been to Moscow. It was a beautiful city, thriving and full of people and commerce. I could have spent days there just shopping and trying out the restaurants. Places I'd heard about all my life—the Kremlin, Red Square, the Bolshoi Theatre—were all at my fingertips. Despite how cool it all was, I actually tried to tune out the city's sights and sounds after a while because it reminded me of . . . well, Dimitri.

He used to talk to me about Russia all the time and had sworn up and down that I'd love it here.

"To you, it'd be like a fairy tale," he'd told me once. It was during a before-school practice late last autumn, just before the first snowfall. The air had been misty, and dew coated everything.

"Sorry, comrade," I'd replied, reaching back to tie my hair into a ponytail. Dimitri had always loved my hair down, but in combat practice? Long hair was a total liability. "Borg and out-of-date music aren't part of any happy ending I've ever imagined."

He'd given me one of his rare, easy grins then, the kind that just slightly crinkled up the corners of his eyes. "Borscht, not borg. And I've seen your appetite. If you were hungry enough, you'd eat it."

"So starvation's necessary for this fairy tale to work out?" There was nothing I loved more than teasing Dimitri. Well, aside from maybe kissing him.

"I'm talking about the land. The buildings. Go to one of the big cities—it's like nothing you've ever seen. Everyone in the U.S. tends to build the same—always in big, chunky blocks. They do what's fast and easy. But in Russia, there are buildings that are like pieces of art. They *are* art—even a lot of the ordinary, everyday buildings. And places like the Winter Palace and Troitsky Church in Saint Petersburg? Those will take your breath away."

His face had been aglow with the memory of sites he'd seen, that joy

making his already handsome features divine. I think he could have named landmarks all day. My heart had burned within me, just from watching him. And then, just like I always did when I worried I might turn sappy or sentimental, I'd made a joke to shift the attention away and hide my emotions. It had switched him back into business mode, and we'd gotten to work.

Now, walking the city streets with Sydney, I wished I could take back that joke and listen to Dimitri talk more about his homeland. I would have given anything to have Dimitri with me here, the way he used to be. He'd been right about the buildings. Sure, most were blocky copies of anything you'd find in the U.S. or anywhere else in the world, but some were exquisite—painted with bright colors, adorned with their strange yet beautiful onion-shaped domes. At times, it really did seem like something from another world. And all the while, I kept thinking that it should have been Dimitri here by my side, pointing things out and explaining them to me. We should have been having a romantic getaway. Dimitri and I could have eaten at exotic restaurants and then gone dancing at night. I could have worn one of the designer dresses I'd had to leave behind in the Saint Petersburg hotel. That's how it was supposed to be. It wasn't supposed to be me with a glowering human.

"Unreal, huh? Like something from a story."

Sydney's voice startled me, and I realized we'd come to a stop in front of our train station. There were a number of them in Moscow. Her echoing of my conversation with Dimitri sent chills down my spine—largely because she was right. The station didn't have the onion domes but still looked like something straight out of a storybook, like a cross between Cinderella's castle and a gingerbread house. It had a big arched roof and towers on either end. Its white walls were interspersed with patches of brown brick and green mosaic, almost making it look striped. In the U.S., some might have called it gaudy. To me, it was beautiful.

I felt tears start to spring to my eyes as I wondered what Dimitri would have said about this building. He probably would have loved it just as he loved everything else here. Realizing that Sydney was waiting for a response, I swallowed back my grief and played flippant teenager. "Maybe something from a story about a train station."

She arched an eyebrow, surprised at my indifference, but she didn't question it. Who could say? Maybe if I kept up the sarcasm, she'd eventually get annoyed and ditch me. Somehow, I doubted I'd be that lucky. I was pretty sure her fear of her superiors trumped any other feelings she might have in regard to me.

We had first-class train accommodations, which turned out to be a lot smaller than I expected. There was a combination bed/sitting bench on each side, a window, and a TV high on the wall. I supposed that would help pass the time, but I often had trouble following Russian television—not just because of the language but also because some of the shows were downright bizarre. Still, Sydney and I would each have our own space, even if the room was cozier than we would have liked.

The colors reminded me a lot of the same fanciful patterns I'd seen throughout the cities. Even the hall outside our cabin was brightly colored, with plush carpet in red and yellow designs and a teal and yellow runner

going down the middle. Inside our room, the benches were covered in cushions with rich orange velvet, and the curtains matched in shades of gold and peach, made of thick heavy fabric embossed with a silky pattern. Between all that and the ornate table in the middle of the cabin, it was almost like traveling in a mini-palace.

It was dark out by the time the train left the station. For whatever reason, the Trans-Siberian always left Moscow at night. It wasn't that late yet, but Sydney said she wanted to sleep, and I didn't want to make her more irate than she already was. So we turned off all the lights, save for a tiny reading lamp by my bed. I'd bought a magazine at the train station, and even if I couldn't understand the language, the pictures of makeup and clothes transcended all cultural barriers. I flipped through the pages as quietly as I could, admiring summer tops and dresses and wondering when—if ever—I'd be able to start worrying about that kind of thing again.

I wasn't tired when I lay down, but sleep took me nonetheless. I was dreaming about water-skiing when suddenly, the waves and sun around me dissolved into a room lined with shelves and shelves of books. Tables with state-of-the-art computers lined the rooms, and there was a calmness that permeated the place. I was in the library at St. Vladimir's Academy.

I groaned. "Oh, come *on*. Not today."

"Why not today? Why not every day?"

I turned and found myself looking into the handsome face of Adrian Ivashkov. Adrian was a Moroi, the queen's great-nephew, and someone I'd left behind in my old life when I took off on this suicide mission. He had beautiful emerald-green eyes that made most girls swoon, particularly since they were paired with stylishly messy brown hair. He was also kind of in love with me and the reason I had so much money on this trip. I'd sweet-talked him out of it.

"True," I admitted. "I suppose I should be grateful you only show up about once a week."

He grinned and sat down backward in one of the slatted wooden chairs. He was tall, like most Moroi, with a leanly muscled build. Moroi guys never got too bulky. "Absence makes the heart grow fonder, Rose. Don't want you to take me for granted."

"We're in no danger of that; don't worry."

"I don't suppose you're going to tell me where you are?"

"Nope."

Aside from Lissa, Adrian was the only other known living spirit user, and among his talents was the ability to show up in my dreams—often uninvited—and talk to me. I took it as a blessing that his powers never actually let him know where I was.

"You kill me, Rose," he said melodramatically. "Every day is agony without you. Empty. Alone. I pine for you, wondering if you're even still alive."

He spoke in an exaggerated, silly sort of way that was characteristic of him. Adrian rarely took things seriously and always had a flippant edge. Spirit also had a tendency to make people unstable, and while he fought it, he wasn't unaffected. Underneath that melodrama, though, I sensed a kernel of truth. No matter how shallow an appearance he gave off, he really did care about me.

I crossed my arms. “Well, I’m still alive, clearly. So I guess you can let me go back to sleep.”

“How many times have I told you? You *are* asleep.”

“And yet I inexplicably feel exhausted talking to you.”

This made him laugh. “Oh, I do so miss you.” That smile faded. “She misses you too.”

I stiffened. *She*. He didn’t even need to say her name. There was no question as to whom he was talking about.

Lissa.

Even saying her name in my mind caused me pain, particularly after seeing her last night. Choosing between Lissa and Dimitri had been the hardest decision of my life, and time passing hadn’t made it any easier. I might have chosen him, but being away from her was like having an arm cut off, particularly because the bond ensured we were never truly apart.

Adrian gave me a canny look, like he could guess my thoughts. “Do you go see her?”

“No,” I said, refusing to acknowledge that I’d just seen her last night. Let him think I was truly free of all that. “That’s not my life anymore.”

“Right. Your life is all about dangerous vigilante missions.”

“You wouldn’t understand anything that isn’t drinking, smoking, or womanizing.”

He shook his head. “You’re the only one I want, Rose.”

Unfortunately, I believed him. It would have been easier for both of us if he could find someone else. “Well, you can keep feeling that way, but you’re going to have to keep waiting.”

“Much longer?”

He asked me this all the time, and every time, I emphasized how long it would be and how he was wasting his time. Thinking of Sydney’s possible lead, I hesitated tonight. “I don’t know.”

Hope blossomed on Adrian’s face. “That’s the most optimistic thing you’ve told me so far.”

“Don’t read too much into it. ‘I don’t know’ could be one day or one year. Or never.”

His mischievous grin returned, and even I had to admit it was cute. “I’m going to hope it’s one day.”

Thinking of Sydney brought a question to my mind. “Hey, have you ever heard of the Alchemists?”

“Sure,” he said.

Typical. “Of course you have.”

“Why? Did you run into them?”

“Kind of.”

“What’d you do?”

“Why do you think I did anything?”

He laughed. “Alchemists only show up when trouble happens, and you bring trouble wherever you go. Be careful, though. They’re religious nuts.”

“That’s kind of extreme,” I said. Sydney’s faith didn’t seem to be anything bad.

“Just don’t let them convert you.” He winked. “I like you being the sinner

you are."

I started to tell him that Sydney probably thought I was beyond all salvation, but he ended the dream, sending me back to sleep.

Except, instead of returning to my own dreams, I woke up. Around me, the train hummed comfortingly as we sped through the Russian countryside. My reading lamp was still on, its light too bright for my sleepy eyes. I reached over to turn it off and noticed then that Sydney's bed was empty. *Probably in the bathroom,* I thought. Yet, I felt uneasy. She and her group of Alchemists were still mysteries, and I suddenly worried that she might have some sinister plan going on. Was she off meeting with some covert operative? I decided to find her.

Admittedly, I had no idea where she could be on a train of this size, but logic had never really deterred me before. No reason they should now. Thankfully, after slipping on my shoes and stepping out in the hall adjacent to our cabin, I discovered I didn't have to look very far.

The corridor was lined with windows, all draped in those rich curtains, and Sydney stood with her back to me, gazing outside, a blanket wrapped around her. Her hair was messy from sleep and looked less gold in the poor lighting.

"Hey . . ." I began hesitantly. "Are you okay?"

She turned slightly toward me. One hand held the blanket; the other played with the cross around her neck. I remembered Adrian's comments about religion.

"I can't sleep," she said bluntly.

"Is it . . . is it because of me?"

Her only answer was to turn back to the window.

"Look," I said, feeling helpless. "If there's anything I can do . . . I mean, aside from going back and canceling this trip . . ."

"I'll handle it," she said. "This is just, well, it's really strange for me. I deal with you guys all the time, but I don't actually *deal* with you, you know?"

"We could probably get you a room of your own, if that would help. We can find an attendant, and I've got the money."

She shook her head. "It's just a couple of days, if that."

I didn't know what else to say. Having Sydney along was inconvenient in the grand scheme of my plans, but I didn't want her to suffer. Watching her play with the cross, I tried to think of something comforting to tell her. Bonding over our views of God might have been a way to get closer, but somehow, I didn't think telling her how I had daily battles with God and doubted His existence lately would really help me out with the whole evil-creature-of-the-night reputation.

"Okay," I said at last. "Let me know if you change your mind."

I returned to my bed and fell asleep surprisingly fast, despite worrying that Sydney would be standing in the hall all night. Yet, when I woke in the morning, she was curled up on her bed, fast asleep. Apparently, her exhaustion had been so strong that even fear of me had driven her to rest. I got up quietly and changed out of the T-shirt and sweatpants I'd gone to bed in. I was hungry for breakfast and figured Sydney might sleep longer if I wasn't around.

The restaurant was in the next car over and looked like something out of an

old movie. Elegant burgundy linens draped the tables, and brass and dark wood, along with bits of bright-colored stained glass art, gave the whole place an antique feel. It looked more like a restaurant I'd find on the streets of Saint Petersburg than a train dining car. I ordered something that reminded me vaguely of french toast, except that it had cheese on it. It came with sausage, which thus far seemed to be the same everywhere I went.

I was just about finished when Sydney wandered in. When I'd met her that first night, I'd assumed her dress pants and blouse had been for the sake of the Nightingale. I was discovering, however, that that was her normal style. She struck me as one of those people who didn't own jeans or T-shirts. She'd been mussed while standing in the hall last night, but now she was in neat black slacks and a dark green sweater. I was in jeans and a long-sleeved gray thermal shirt and felt kind of sloppy beside her. Her hair was brushed and styled but had a slightly messy look that I suspected never went away, no matter how hard she tried. At least I had my sleek ponytail going for me today.

She slid across from me and ordered an omelet when the server came by, again speaking in Russian.

"How do you know that?" I asked.

"What, Russian?" She shrugged. "I had to learn it growing up. And a few other languages."

"Wow." I had taken intros to a couple of languages too and performed miserably in all of them. I hadn't thought much of it at the time, but now, because of this trip and because of Dimitri, I really wished I'd learned Russian. I supposed it wasn't too late, and I had picked up a few phrases in my time here, but still . . . it was a daunting task.

"You must have to learn a lot of stuff for this job," I mused, pondering what it must mean to be part of a secret group that crossed international lines and interacted with all sorts of governments. Something else crossed my mind. "And what about that stuff you used on the Strigoi? That disintegrated the body?"

She smiled. Almost. "Well, I told you the Alchemists started off as a group of people trying to make potions, right? That's a chemical we developed to get rid of Strigoi bodies fast."

"Could you use it to actually kill one?" I asked. Dousing a Strigoi in some dissolving liquid would be a lot easier than the usual ways: decapitation, staking, or burning.

"Afraid not. Only works on corpses."

"Bummer," I said. I wondered if she had other potions up her sleeve but figured I should ration my amount of Sydney questions for the day. "What are we going to do when we get to Omsh?"

"Omsk," she corrected. "We'll get a car and drive the rest of the way."

"Have you been there? To this village?"

She nodded. "Once."

"What's it like?" I asked, surprised to hear a wistful note in my own voice. Aside from my quest to find Dimitri, there was a piece of me that just wanted to cling to everything I could of him. I wanted to know everything about him that I hadn't known before. If the school had given me his possessions, I would

have slept with them each night. His room had been cleared out pretty quickly, though. Now I could only gather what pieces of him I could, as though hoarding these bits of information would keep him with me somehow.

"It's like any other dhampir town, I guess."

"I've never been to one."

The server set Sydney's omelet down, and she paused with her fork in the air. "Really? I thought all of you . . . well, I don't know."

I shook my head. "I've been at the Academy my whole life. More or less." My two-year stint among humans wasn't really relevant.

Sydney chewed thoughtfully. I was willing to wager she wouldn't finish the omelet. From what I'd seen that first night and while waiting for trains yesterday, she hardly seemed to eat anything. It was like she subsisted on air alone. Maybe it was another Alchemist thing. Most likely it was just a Sydney thing.

"The town is half-human and half-dhampir, but the dhampirs blend in. They have a whole underground society that the humans are completely oblivious to."

I'd always figured there was a whole subculture going on, but I'd had no idea how it would fit into the rest of the town. "And?" I asked. "What's that subculture like?"

She set her fork down. "Let's just say you'd better brace yourself."

FIVE

THE REST OF THE TRIP passed uneventfully. Sydney never entirely lost that discomfort she seemed to have around me, but sometimes, while I was trying to figure out Russian television, she'd take the time to explain what was going on. There were some cultural differences between these shows and the ones we'd both grown up with, so we had that in common. Every once in a while, she'd crack a smile over something we both found funny, and I'd sense there was someone in there I could possibly be friends with. I knew there was no way I'd ever find a replacement for Lissa, but I think some part of me still longed to fill the void of friendship that had been opened up when I left her behind.

Sydney napped throughout the day, and I began to think she was just an insomniac with bizarre sleep patterns. She also continued her equally odd treatment of food, hardly touching her meals. She always let me have the leftovers and was a bit more adventurous with Russian cuisine. I'd had to experiment when I first arrived, and it was nice to have the guidance of someone who, though not a local, knew a lot more about this country than me.

On the third day of our trip, we arrived in Omsk. Omsk was a larger and prettier city than I'd expected of Siberia. Dimitri had always teased me that my images of Siberia looking like Antarctica were wrong, and I could tell that he was right—at least as far as the southern part of the region was concerned. The weather wasn't much different from what I'd have found in Montana this time of year, cool spring air occasionally warmed by sunshine.

Sydney had told me when we got there, she'd get us a ride from some Moroi she knew. Several lived in the city, blending in with the large population. Yet as the day went on, we discovered a problem. No Moroi would take us to the village. Apparently, the road was dangerous. Strigoi often hung out near it at night, hoping to catch traveling Moroi or dhampirs. The more Sydney explained it, the more worried I became about my plan. Apparently, there weren't many Strigoi *in* Dimitri's town itself. According to her, they lurked on the town's periphery, but few lived out there permanently. If that was the case, my odds of finding Dimitri had dropped. Things got even worse as Sydney continued describing the situation.

"A lot of Strigoi travel the country looking for victims, and the village is just an area they pass through," she explained. "The road is kind of remote, so some Strigoi will stay for a while and try to get easy prey. Then they move on."

"In the U.S., Strigoi often hide in large cities," I said uneasily.

"They do that here too. It's easier for them to take victims without being noticed."

Yes, this definitely threw a wrench into my plans. If Dimitri wasn't residing in this town, I was going to have some serious problems. I'd known Strigoi liked big cities, but somehow, I'd convinced myself Dimitri would return to the place where he grew up.

But if Dimitri wasn't there . . . well, suddenly, the enormity of Siberia hit me. I'd learned Omsk wasn't even the biggest city in the region, and finding even one Strigoi here could be hard. Looking for him in any number of cities that might be larger? Things could get very, very ugly if my hunch proved wrong.

Since setting out to find Dimitri, I'd occasionally had weak moments in which I half-hoped I'd never find him. The idea of him as a Strigoi still tormented me. I was also visited by other images . . . images of the way he'd been and memories of the time we'd spent together.

I think my most precious memory was of just before he was turned. It was one of those times when I'd sucked up a lot of the spirit-induced darkness from Lissa. I'd been out of control, unable to get a grip. I was afraid of becoming a monster, afraid of killing myself like another shadow-kissed guardian had.

Dimitri had brought me back to myself, lending me his strength. I'd realized then just how strong our connection was, how perfectly we understood each other. I'd been skeptical about people being soul mates in the past, but at that moment, I knew it was true. And with that emotional connection had come a physical one. Dimitri and I had finally given in to the attraction. We'd sworn we never would, but . . . well, our feelings were just too strong. Staying away from each other had turned out to be impossible. We'd had sex, and it had been my first time ever. Sometimes I felt certain it would be my only time.

The act itself had been amazing, and I'd been unable to separate the physical joy from the emotional. Afterward, we'd lain together in that small cabin for as long as we dared, and that had been amazing too. It had been one of the few moments where I'd felt he was truly mine.

"Do you remember Victor's lust charm?" I had asked, snuggling closer against him.

Dimitri looked at me like I was crazy. "Of course."

Victor Dashkov was a royal Moroi, one who had been friends with Lissa and her family. Little did we know that he'd secretly studied spirit for years and had identified Lissa as a spirit user before she even knew. He'd tortured her with all sorts of mind games that truly made her think she was going crazy. His schemes had fully culminated in his kidnapping and torturing her until she healed the disease that was killing him.

Victor was now in prison for life, both for what he'd done to Lissa and because of his treasonous plans for rebellion against the Moroi government. He had been one of the few to know about my relationship with Dimitri, something that had worried me to no end. He'd even furthered our relationship by creating a lust charm—a necklace infused with earth and compulsion. The charm was full of dangerous magic that had made Dimitri

and me give into our most basic instincts. We had pulled back at the last moment, and until our night in the cabin, I had believed our charm-induced encounter to be the ultimate physical high.

"I didn't realize it could get better," I had told Dimitri after we'd actually slept together. I felt a little shy talking about it. "I thought about it all the time . . . what happened between us."

He turned to me, tugging the covers up. The cabin was cold, but its bed had warm blankets. I suppose we could have put clothes on, but that was the last thing I wanted to do. Being pressed skin-to-skin felt too good.

"I did too."

"You did?" I asked, surprised. "I thought . . . I don't know. I thought you were too disciplined for that. I thought you'd try to forget it."

Dimitri laughed and kissed my neck. "Rose, how could I forget being naked with someone as beautiful as you? I stayed awake so many nights, replaying every detail. I told myself over and over that it was wrong, but you're impossible to forget." His lips moved to my collarbone, and his hand stroked my hip. "You're burned into my mind forever. There is nothing, nothing in this world that will ever change that."

And it was memories like that that made it so hard to comprehend this quest to kill him, even if he was a Strigoi. Yet . . . at the same time, it was exactly because of memories like that that I had to destroy him. I needed to remember him as the man who'd loved me and held me in bed. I needed to remember that that man would not want to stay a monster.

I wasn't very excited when Sydney showed me the car she'd bought, particularly since I'd given her the money for it.

"We're going in that?" I exclaimed. "Can it even make it that far?" The trip was apparently seven hours.

She gave me a shocked look. "Are you serious? Do you know what this is? It's a 1972 Citroën. These things are amazing. Do you have any idea how hard it would have been to get this into the country back in the Soviet days? I can't believe that guy actually sold it. He's clueless."

I knew little about the Soviet era and even less about classic cars, but Sydney stroked the shiny red hood like she was in love. Who would have guessed? She was a car geek. Maybe it was valuable, and I just couldn't appreciate it. I was more into sleek, brand-new sports cars. To be fair, this car didn't have any dents or rust, and aside from an outdated look, it appeared clean and well cared for.

"Will it run?" I asked.

If possible, her expression grew even more incredulous. "Of course!"

And it did. The engine sprang to life with a steady hum, and with the way it accelerated, I started to understand her fascination. She wanted to drive, and I was about to argue that it had been my money that bought it. Seeing the adoring look on her face, though, I finally decided not to come between her and the car.

I was just glad we were leaving right away. It was already late afternoon. If the road was as dangerous as everyone claimed, we wouldn't want to be out there while it was dark. Sydney agreed but said we could get most of the trip

in before sundown and then stay overnight at a place she knew. We'd arrive at our destination in the morning.

The farther we drove from Omsk, the more remote the terrain became. As I studied it, I began to understand Dimitri's love of this land. It had a scrubby, barren look, true, but spring was turning the plains green, and there was something hauntingly beautiful about seeing all this untouched wilderness. It reminded me of Montana in some ways yet had a certain quality that was all its own.

I couldn't help but use Sydney's crush on the car as a means of conversation. "Do you know a lot about cars?" I asked.

"Some," she said. "My dad's the Alchemist in our family, but my mom's a mechanic."

"Really?" I asked, surprised. "That's kind of . . . unusual." Of course, I was hardly one to talk about gender roles. Considering my life was dedicated to fighting and killing, I couldn't really claim to have a traditionally feminine job either.

"She's really good and taught me a lot. I wouldn't have minded doing that for a living. Wouldn't have minded going to college, either." There was a bitter note in her voice. "I guess there are a lot of other things I wish I could do."

"Why can't you?"

"I had to be the next family Alchemist. My sister . . . well, she's older, and usually it's the oldest kid who has to do the job. But, she's kind of . . . worthless."

"That's harsh."

"Yeah, maybe. But she just couldn't handle this kind of thing. When it comes to organizing her lip gloss collection, she's unstoppable. But managing the kinds of networks and people we do? No, she'd never be able to do it. Dad said I was the only one capable of it."

"That's a compliment, at least."

"I guess."

Sydney looked so sad now that I felt bad for bringing it up. "If you could go to college, what would you study?"

"Greek and Roman architecture."

I decided then it was a good thing I wasn't behind the wheel, because I probably would have driven off the road. "Seriously?"

"You know anything about it?"

"Um, no."

"It's amazing." The sad expression was replaced by one of wonder—she looked nearly as enamored as she'd been of the car. I understood then why she'd liked the train station. "The ingenuity it took for some of that . . . well, it's just unreal. If the Alchemists won't send me back to the U.S. after this, I'm hoping I'll get assigned to Greece or Italy."

"That would be cool."

"Yeah." Her smile faded. "But there are no guarantees you'll get what you want with this job."

She fell silent after that, and I decided that coaxing her into this small conversation had been victory enough. I left her to her own thoughts of classic

cars and architecture while my mind wandered to topics of my own. Strigoi. Duty. Dimitri. Always Dimitri . . .

Well, Dimitri and Lissa. It was always a toss-up over who would cause me more pain. Today, as the car lulled me into a daze, it was Lissa I went to, thanks largely to Adrian's recent visit in my dream.

Early evening in Russia meant early morning in Montana. Of course, since the school ran on a nocturnal schedule, it was technically night for them too in spite of the sunshine. It was nearly curfew, and everyone would have to return to their own dorms soon.

Lissa was with Adrian, over in his room in guest housing. Adrian, like Avery, had graduated, but as the only other known spirit user, he'd come to stay indefinitely at the school and work with Lissa. They'd just spent a long, exhausting evening working on dream walking and sat on the floor facing each other. With a sigh, Lissa collapsed back and lay down, stretching her arms over her head.

"This is useless," she groaned. "I'm never going to learn it."

"Never took you for a quitter, cousin." Adrian's voice was as flippant as usual, but I could tell he was weary too. They weren't really cousins; that was just a term royals sometimes used with each other.

"I just don't understand how you do it."

"I don't know how to explain it. I just think about it, and . . . well, it happens." He shrugged and pulled out the cigarettes he always carried. "Do you mind?"

"Yes," she said. To my surprise, he put them away. What the hell? He'd never asked me if I minded if he smoked—which I did. In fact, half the time, I swore he did it to annoy me, which made no sense. Adrian was way past the age when guys tried to attract girls they liked by picking on them.

He tried to explain the process. "I just think about who I want and sort of . . . I don't know. Expand my mind toward them."

Lissa sat up and crossed her legs. "Sounds a lot like how Rose described reading me."

"Probably the same principle. Look, it took you a while to learn auras. This is no different. And you're not the only one with a learning curve. I'm only now finally moving past healing scratches, and you can bring back the dead, which—call me crazy—is kind of hard-core." He paused. "Of course, some would argue that I *am* actually crazy."

At the mention of auras, she studied him and summoned the ability to see the field of light that shone around every living thing. His aura came into focus, surrounding him in a golden glow. According to Adrian, her aura was the same. No other Moroi had that kind of pure gold. Lissa and Adrian figured it was unique to spirit users.

He smiled, guessing what she was doing. "How's it look?"

"The same."

"See how good you are at it now? Just be patient with the dreams."

Lissa wanted so badly to walk dreams the same way he could. Despite her disappointment, I was glad she couldn't. Adrian's dream visits were hard enough on me. Seeing her would . . . well, I wasn't entirely sure, but it would make this cool, hard attitude I was trying to maintain in Russia a lot harder.

"I just want to know how she is," said Lissa in a small voice. "I can't stand not knowing." It was the conversation with Christian all over again.

"I saw her the other day. She's fine. And I'll go again soon."

Lissa nodded. "Do you think she'll do it? Do you think she can kill Dimitri?"

Adrian took a long time in answering. "I think she can. The question will be if it kills her in the process."

Lissa flinched, and I was a bit surprised. The answer was as blunt as one Christian might give. "God, I wish she hadn't decided to go after him."

"Wishing's useless now. Rose has got to do this. It's the only way we can get her back." He paused. "It's the only way she'll be able to move on."

Adrian surprised me sometimes, but this took the prize. Lissa thought it was foolish and suicidal to go after Dimitri. I knew Sydney would agree if I told her the truth about this trip. But Adrian . . . silly, shallow, party-boy Adrian understood? Studying him through Lissa's eyes, I realized he actually did. He didn't like it, and I could hear the hurt in his words. He cared about me. My having such strong feelings for someone else caused him pain. And yet . . . he truly believed that I was doing the right thing—the only thing I *could* do.

Lissa looked at the clock. "I've got to go before curfew. I should probably study for my history test, too."

Adrian grinned. "Studying's overrated. Just find someone smart to copy off."

She stood up. "Are you saying I'm not smart?"

"Hell no." He rose also and went to pour himself a drink from the fully stocked bar he kept on hand. Self-medicating was his irresponsible way of keeping spirit's effects at bay, and if he'd been using spirit all night, he would want the numbness of his vices. "You're the smartest person I know. But that doesn't mean you have to do unnecessary work."

"You can't succeed in life if you don't work. Copying from others won't get you anywhere."

"Whatever," he said with a grin. "I copied all through school, and look how well I'm doing today."

With an eye roll, Lissa gave him a quick hug goodbye and left. Once out of his sight, her smile faded a bit. In fact, her thoughts took a decidedly dark turn. Mentioning me had stirred up all sorts of feelings within. She was worried about me—desperately worried. She'd told Christian that she felt bad about what had happened between us, but the full force of that didn't hit me until now. She was racked by guilt and confusion, continually berating herself for what she should have done. And above all, she missed me. She had that same feeling I did—like a part of her had been cut out.

Adrian lived on the fourth floor, and Lissa opted for the stairs rather than the elevator. All the while, her mind spun with worry. Worries about whether she'd ever master spirit. Worry for me. Worry that she wasn't currently feeling spirit's dark side effects, which made her wonder if I was absorbing them, just as a guardian named Anna had. She'd lived centuries ago and was bonded to St. Vladimir, the school's namesake. She'd absorbed spirit's nasty effects from him—and had been driven insane.

On the second floor, Lissa could make out the sounds of shouting, even through the door that separated the stairwell from the hallway. Despite knowing it had nothing to do with her, she hesitated, curiosity getting the best

of her. A moment later, she quietly pushed the door open and stepped into the hall. The voices were coming from around the corner. She carefully peered around it—not that she needed to. She recognized the voices.

Avery Lazar stood in the hallway, hands on her hips as she stared at her father. He stood in the doorway to what must have been his suite. Their stances were rigid and hostile, and anger crackled between them.

"I'll do what I want," she yelled. "I'm not your slave."

"You're my daughter," he said in a voice both calm and condescending. "Though at times I wish you weren't."

Ouch. Both Lissa and I were shocked.

"Then why are you making me stay in this hellhole? Let me go back to Court!"

"And embarrass me further? We barely got out without damaging this family's reputation—much. No way am I going to send you there alone and let you do God knows what."

"Then send me to Mom! Switzerland's got to be better than this place."

There was a pause. "Your mother is . . . busy."

"Oh, nice," said Avery, voice heavy with sarcasm. "That's a polite way of saying she doesn't want me. No surprise. I'd just interfere with her and that guy she's sleeping with."

"Avery!" His voice rang out loud and angry. Lissa flinched and stepped back. "This conversation is done. Get back to your room and sober up before someone sees you. I expect you at breakfast tomorrow, and I expect you to be respectable. We have some important visitors."

"Yeah, and God knows we've got to keep up appearances."

"Go to your room," he repeated. "Before I call Simon and make him drag you there."

"Yes, sir," she simpered. "Right away, sir. Anything you say, sir."

And with that, he slammed the door. Lissa, ducking back behind the corner, could hardly believe he'd said those things to his own daughter. For a few moments, there was silence. Then, Lissa heard the sound of footsteps—coming toward her. Avery suddenly rounded the corner and stopped in front of Lissa, giving us our first good look of her.

Avery was wearing a tight, short dress made of some kind of blue fabric that shone silvery in the light. Her hair hung long and wild, and the tears pouring from her blue-gray eyes had destroyed the heavy makeup she wore. The scent of alcohol came through loud and clear. She hastily ran a hand over her eyes, obviously embarrassed at being seen like this.

"Well," she said flatly. "I guess you overheard our family drama."

Lissa felt equally embarrassed at being caught spying. "I—I'm sorry. I didn't mean to. I was just passing by . . ."

Avery gave a harsh laugh. "Well, I don't think it matters. Probably everyone in the building heard us."

"I'm sorry," Lissa repeated.

"Don't be. You didn't do anything wrong."

"No . . . I mean, I'm sorry he . . . you know, said those things to you."

"It's part of being a 'good' family. Everyone's got skeletons in their closet." Avery crossed her arms and leaned against the wall. Even upset and messy,

she was beautiful. “God, I hate him sometimes. No offense, but this place is so fucking boring. I found some sophomore guys to hang with tonight, but . . . they were pretty boring too. The only thing they had going for them was their beer.”

“Why . . . why did your dad bring you here?” Lissa asked. “Why aren’t you . . . I don’t know, in college?”

Avery gave a harsh laugh. “He doesn’t trust me enough. When we were at Court, I got involved with this cute guy who worked there—total non-royal, of course. Dad freaked out and was afraid people would find out. So when he got the job here, he brought me along to keep an eye on me—and torture me. I think he’s afraid I’ll run off with a human if I go to college.” She sighed. “I swear to God, if Reed wasn’t here, I’d just run away, period.”

Lissa didn’t say anything for a long time. She’d gone out of her way to avoid Avery diligently. With all the orders the queen was giving Lissa lately, this seemed the only way Lissa could fight back and stop herself from being controlled. But now, she wondered if she’d been wrong about Avery. Avery didn’t seem like a spy for Tatiana. She didn’t seem like someone who wanted to mold Lissa into a perfect royal. Mostly, Avery seemed like a sad, hurting girl, whose life was spinning out of control. Someone who was being ordered around as much as Lissa was lately.

With a deep breath, Lissa rushed forward with her next words. “Do you want to eat lunch with Christian and me tomorrow? No one would mind if you came to our lunch period. I can’t promise it’ll be, um, as exciting as you want.”

Avery smiled again, but this time, it was less bitter. “Well, my other plans were to get drunk by myself in my room.” She lifted a bottle of what looked like whiskey out of her purse. “Scored some stuff of my own.”

Lissa wasn’t entirely sure what kind of an answer that was. “So . . . I’ll see you at lunch?”

Now Avery hesitated. But slowly, a faint gleam of hope and interest appeared on her face. Concentrating, Lissa tried to bring up her aura. She had a little difficulty at first, probably worn out from all the practice with Adrian tonight. But when she was finally able to get a grip on Avery’s aura, she saw it was a mix of colors: green, blue, and gold. Not uncommon. It was currently ringed in red, as often happened when people were upset. But right before Lissa’s eyes, that redness faded.

“Yeah,” Avery said at last. “That would be great.”

“I think this is as far as we can go today.”

On the other side of the world, Sydney’s voice startled me out of Lissa’s thoughts. I didn’t know how long I’d been daydreaming, but Sydney had turned off the main highway and was driving us into a small town that fit perfectly with my backwoods images of Siberia. In fact, “town” was a total exaggeration. There were a few scattered houses, a store, and a gas station. Farmland stretched beyond the buildings, and I saw more horses than cars. The few people who were out stared at our car in amazement. The sky had turned deep orange, and the sun was sinking farther and farther into the horizon. Sydney was right. It was nearly nightfall, and we needed to be off the

road.

"We're only a couple hours away at most," she continued. "We made really good time and should get there pretty quickly in the morning." She drove to the other side of the village—which took, like, a minute—and pulled up in front of a plain white house with a barn beside it. "Here's where we're staying."

We got out of the car and approached the house. "Are these friends of yours?"

"Nope. Never met them. But they're expecting us."

More mysterious Alchemist connections. The door was answered by a friendly looking human in her twenties who urged us to come inside. She only spoke a few words of English, but Sydney's translation skills carried us through. Sydney was more outgoing and charming than I'd seen her thus far, probably because our hosts weren't despicable vampiric offspring.

You wouldn't think riding in a car all day would be tiring, but I felt exhausted and was anxious to get an early start in the morning. So after dinner and a little TV, Sydney and I went to the room that had been prepared for us. It was small and plain but had two twin beds covered in thick, fluffy blankets. I snuggled into mine, grateful for the softness and the warmth, and wondered if I'd dream of Lissa or Adrian.

I didn't. I did, however, wake up to a slight wave of nausea rolling through me—the nausea that told me there was a Strigoi nearby.

SIX

I BOLTED UPRIGHT, EVERY PART of me awake and alert. There were no city lights to shine through the window, and it took me several seconds to make out anything in the darkened room. Sydney was curled up in her own bed, her face unusually at peace as she slept.

Where was the Strigoi? Definitely not in our room. Was it in the house? Everyone had said the road to Dimitri's town was dangerous. Still, I would have thought Strigoi would be going after Moroi and dhampirs—though humans were a big part of their diet too. Thinking of the nice couple who'd welcomed us into their home, I felt something tight clench in my chest. No way would I let anything happen to them.

Slipping quietly out of the bed, I grabbed a hold of my stake and crept from the room without disturbing Sydney. No one else was awake, and as soon as I was in the living room, the nausea went away. Okay. The Strigoi wasn't inside, which was a good thing. It was outdoors, apparently on the side of the house near my room. Still moving silently, I went out the house's front door and walked around the corner, as quiet as the night around me.

The nausea grew stronger as I approached the barn, and I couldn't help but feel smug. I was going to surprise this Strigoi who'd thought it could sneak into a tiny human village for dinner. There. Right near the barn's entrance, I could see a long shadow moving. *Gotcha*, I thought. I readied the stake and started to spring forward—

—And then something struck me on the shoulder.

I stumbled, astonished, and looked into the face of a Strigoi. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the shadow by the barn materialize into *another* Strigoi striding forward. Panic shot through me. There were two, and my secret detection system hadn't been able to tell the difference. Worse, they'd gotten the drop on me.

A thought immediately flashed into my mind: *What if one's Dimitri?*

It wasn't. At least, this close one wasn't. It was a woman. I had yet to get a feel for the second one. That one was approaching from my other side, moving fast. I had to deal with this immediate threat, though, and swiped at the woman with my stake, hoping to wound her, but she dodged so quickly, I hardly saw her move. She struck out toward me in an almost casual way. I wasn't fast enough to react and went flying toward the other Strigoi—a guy who was *not* Dimitri.

I responded quickly, leaping up and kicking him. I held the stake out, creating distance between us, but it did little good when the woman came up

from behind and grabbed me, jerking my body against hers. I gave a muffled cry and felt her hands on my throat. She was probably going to break my neck, I realized. It was a fast, easy technique for Strigoi that then let them drag off a victim for feeding.

I struggled, jostling her hands slightly, but as the other Strigoi leaned over us, I knew it was useless. They'd surprised me. There were two of them. They were strong.

Panic surged in me again, an overwhelming sense of fear and desperation. I was afraid every time I fought Strigoi, but this fear was reaching a breaking point. It was unfocused and out of control, and I suspected it was touched by a bit of the madness and darkness I'd absorbed from Lissa. The feelings exploded within me, and I wondered if they'd destroy me before the Strigoi did. I was in very real danger of dying here—of letting Sydney and the others get killed. The rage and distress of that thought were smothering.

Then, suddenly, it was like the earth burst open. Translucent forms, glowing softly in the darkness, sprang up everywhere. Some looked like normal people. Others were horrible, their faces gaunt and skull-like. Ghosts. Spirits. They surrounded us, their presence making my hair stand on end and sending a splitting headache through my skull.

The ghosts turned toward me. I'd had this happen before, on a plane, when apparitions had swarmed and threatened to consume me. I braced myself, trying desperately to summon up the strength to build barriers that would shut me off from the spirit world. It was a skill I'd had to learn, one I usually kept in place without any effort. The desperation and panic of this situation had cracked my control. In that horrible, blood-curdling moment, I again selfishly wished Mason hadn't found peace and left this world. I would have felt better if his ghost were here.

Then I realized I wasn't their target.

The ghosts were mobbing the two Strigoi. The spirits didn't have solid forms, but every place they touched and passed through me felt like ice. The female Strigoi immediately began waving her arms to fend the apparitions off, snarling in rage and something almost like fear. The ghosts didn't appear to be able to hurt the Strigoi, but they were apparently pretty annoying—and distracting.

I staked the male Strigoi before he ever saw me coming. Immediately, the ghosts around him moved to the woman. She was good, I'd give her that. Despite struggling to fend the spirits off, she was still able to dodge my attacks fairly well. A lucky punch from her made stars burst before my eyes and sent me into the barn wall. I still had that ghost-induced splitting headache, and my head slamming into the barn didn't help. Staggering up, dizzy, I made my way back to her and continued my efforts to get a shot in at her heart. She managed to keep her chest out of my range—at least until one particularly terrifying ghost caught her off guard. Her momentary distraction gave me my chance, and I staked her, too. She fell to the ground—leaving me alone with the spirits.

With the Strigoi, the ghosts had clearly wanted to attack them. With me, it was a lot like on the plane. They seemed fascinated by me, desperate to get my attention. Only, with dozens of phantoms swarming, it might as well have

been an attack.

Desperately, I tried again to summon my walls, to block the ghosts off from me as I'd done long ago. The effort was excruciating. Somehow, my out-of-control emotions had brought the spirits, and while I was calmer now, that control was harder to bring about. My head continued throbbing. Gritting my teeth, I focused every ounce of my strength into blocking out the ghosts.

"Go away," I hissed. "I don't need you anymore."

For a moment, it looked like my efforts were going to be useless. Then, slowly, one by one, the spirits began to fade. I felt the control I'd learned before gradually slip into place. Soon, there was nothing there but me, the darkness, and the barn—and Sydney.

I noticed her just as I collapsed to the ground. She was running out of the house in her pajamas, face pale. Kneeling at my side, she helped me sit up, legitimate fear all over her. "Rose! Are you okay?"

I felt like every scrap of energy in my brain and body had been sucked out. I couldn't move. I couldn't think.

"No," I told her.

And then I passed out.

I dreamed of Dimitri again, his arms around me and beautiful face leaning over me to care for me as he'd done so often when I was sick. Memories of things past came to me, the two of us laughing over some joke. Sometimes, in these dreams, he'd carry me away. Sometimes, we'd be riding in a car. Occasionally, his face would start to take on that fearsome Strigoi image that always tormented me. Then I'd quickly order my mind to brush such thoughts away.

Dimitri had taken care of me so many times and had always been there when I needed him. It had gone both ways, though. Admittedly, he had not seemed to end up in the infirmary as much as me. That was just my luck. Even when he was injured, he wouldn't acknowledge it. And as I dreamed and hallucinated, images came to me of one of the few times I'd been able to take care of him.

Just before the school had been attacked, Dimitri had been involved in a number of tests with me and my fellow novices to see how well we reacted to surprise assaults. Dimitri was so tough that he was almost impossible to beat, though he still got bruised up a number of times. I'd run into him in the gym once during these tests, surprised to see a cut on his cheek. It was hardly fatal, but there was a fair amount of blood showing.

"Do you realize you're bleeding to death?" I'd exclaimed. It was kind of an exaggeration, but still.

He touched his cheek absentmindedly and seemed to notice the injury for the first time. "I wouldn't quite go that far. It's nothing."

"It's nothing until you get an infection!"

"You know that's not likely," he said obstinately. That was true. Moroi—aside from contracting the occasional rare disease, as Victor had—hardly ever got sick. We dhampirs had inherited that from them, just as Sydney's tattoo gave her some protection. Nonetheless, I wasn't about to let Dimitri bleed all over.

"Come *on*," I said, pointing to the small bathroom in the gym. My voice had been fierce, and to my surprise, he'd actually obeyed.

After wetting a washcloth, I gently cleaned his face. He continued protesting at first but finally fell quiet. The bathroom was small, and we were just a few inches from each other. I could smell his clean, intoxicating scent and studied every detail of his face and strong body. My heart raced in my chest, but we were supposed to be on good behavior, so I tried to appear cool and collected. He was eerily calm too, but when I brushed his hair back behind his ears to clean the rest of his face, he flinched. My fingertips touching his skin had sent shock waves through me, and he'd felt them too. He caught hold of my hand and pulled it away.

"Enough," he said, voice husky. "I'm fine."

"Are you sure?" I asked. He hadn't released my hand. We were so, so close. The small bathroom seemed ready to burst with the electricity building between us. I knew this couldn't last but hated to let go of him. God, it was hard being responsible sometimes.

"Yes," he said. His voice was soft, and I knew he wasn't mad at me. He was afraid, afraid of how little it would take to ignite a fire between us. As it was, I was warm all over, just from the feel of his hand. Touching him made me feel complete, like the person I was always meant to be. "Thank you, Roza."

He released my hand, and we left, both off to do our own things that day. But the feel of his skin and hair stayed with me for hours afterward. . . .

I don't know why I dreamed that memory after being attacked near the barn. It seemed weird that I'd dream of taking care of Dimitri when *I* was the one who needed care. I guess it didn't really matter what the memory was, so long as it involved him. Dimitri always made me feel better, even in my dreams, giving me strength and resolve.

But as I lay in that delirium and moved in and out of consciousness, his comforting face would occasionally take on those terrible red eyes and fangs. I'd whimper, fighting hard to push that sight away. Other times, he didn't look like Dimitri at all. He'd turn into a man I didn't know, an older Moroi with dark hair and cunning eyes, gold jewelry glinting on his neck and ears. I'd cry out for Dimitri again, and eventually, his face would return, safe and wonderful.

At one point, though, the image shifted again, this time into a woman's. Clearly, she wasn't Dimitri, but there was something about her brown eyes that reminded me of him. She was older, in her forties maybe, and a dhampir. She laid a cool cloth across my forehead, and I realized I wasn't dreaming anymore. My body ached, and I was in an unfamiliar bed, in an unfamiliar room. No sign of the Strigoi. Had I dreamed them, too?

"Don't try to move," the woman said with the faintest trace of a Russian accent. "You took some bad hits."

My eyes widened as the events by the barn came back to me, the ghosts I'd summoned up. It hadn't been a dream. "Where's Sydney? Is she okay?"

"She's fine. Don't worry." Something in the woman's voice told me I could believe her.

"Where am I?"

"In Baia."

Baia, Baia. Somewhere, in the back of my head, that name was familiar. All of a sudden, it clicked. Long, long ago, Dimitri had said it. He'd only ever mentioned his town's name once and, even though I'd tried, I had never been able to remember it. Sydney would never tell me the name. But now we were here. Dimitri's home.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"Olena," she said. "Olena Belikova."

SEVEN

IT WAS LIKE CHRISTMAS MORNING.

I wasn't usually big on God or fate, but now I was seriously reconsidering. After I'd passed out, Sydney had apparently made some frantic calls, and someone she knew in Baia had driven to us—risking the darkness—to rescue us and take us back where I could be treated. That was no doubt why I'd had vague sensations of being in a car during my delirium; it hadn't all been part of the dream.

And then, somehow, out of all the dhampirs in Baia, I had been taken to Dimitri's mother. That was enough to make me seriously consider that there might truly be forces greater than me at work in the universe. No one told me exactly how it happened, but I soon learned Olena Belikova had a reputation among her peers for healing—and not even any sort of magical healing. She'd had medical training and was the person other dhampirs—and even some Moroi—went to in this region when they wanted to avoid human attention. Still. The coincidence was eerie, and I couldn't help but think there was something going on that I didn't understand.

For now, I didn't worry too much about the hows and whys of my current situation. I was too busy staring wide-eyed at my surroundings and its inhabitants. Olena didn't live alone. All of Dimitri's sisters—three of them—lived in the house too, along with their kids. The family resemblance was startling. None of them looked exactly like Dimitri, but in every face, I could see him. The eyes. The smile. Even the sense of humor. Seeing them fed the Dimitri withdrawal I'd had since he'd disappeared—and made it worse at the same time. Whenever I looked at any of them out of my peripheral vision, I'd think I was seeing Dimitri. It was like a house of mirrors, with distorted reflections of him everywhere.

Even the house gave me a thrill. There were no obvious signs that Dimitri had ever lived there, but I kept thinking, *This is where he grew up. He walked these floors, touched these walls. . . .* As I walked from room to room, I'd touch the walls too, trying to draw his energy from them. I'd envision him lounging on the couch, home on break from school. I wondered if he'd slid down the banisters when he was little. The images were so real that I had to keep reminding myself that he hadn't been here in ages.

"You've made an amazing recovery," Olena noted the next morning after I'd been brought to her. She watched with approval as I inhaled a plate of blini. They were ultra-thin pancakes stacked and layered with butter and jam. My body always required a lot of food to keep its strength up, and I figured as

long as I wasn't chewing with my mouth open or anything, I had no reason to feel bad about eating so much. "I thought you were dead when Abe and Sydney brought you in."

"Who?" I asked between bites of food.

Sydney sat at the table with the rest of the family, hardly touching her food as usual. She seemed clearly uneasy at being in a dhampir household, but when I'd first come downstairs this morning, I'd definitely seen some relief in her eyes.

"Abe Mazur," said Sydney. Unless I was mistaken, some of the other people at the table exchanged knowing glances. "He's a Moroi. I . . . I didn't know how badly you were injured last night, so I called him. He drove down with his guardians. He was the one who brought you here."

Guardians. Plural. "Is he royal?" Mazur wasn't a royal name, but that wasn't always a sure sign of someone's lineage. And while I was beginning to trust Sydney's social networking and connections to powerful people, I couldn't imagine why a royal would go out of his way for me. Maybe he owed the Alchemists a favor.

"No," she said bluntly. I frowned. A non-royal Moroi with more than one guardian? Very odd. It was clear she wasn't going to say anything else on the matter—at least not for now.

I swallowed another mouthful of blini and turned my attention back to Olena. "Thanks for taking me in."

Dimitri's older sister, Karolina, sat at the table too, along with her baby girl and son Paul. Paul was about ten and seemed fascinated by me. Dimitri's teenage sister, Viktoria, was also there. She appeared to be a little younger than me. The third Belikov sister was named Sonya and had left for work before I woke up. I'd have to wait to meet her.

"Did you really kill two Strigoi all by yourself?" Paul asked me.

"Paul," chastised Karolina. "That's not a nice question to ask."

"But it's an exciting one," said Viktoria with a grin. Her brown hair was streaked with gold, but her dark eyes sparkled so much like Dimitri's when he was excited that it tugged at my heart. Again, I had that taunting sensation of Dimitri being here but not here.

"She did," said Sydney. "I saw the bodies. Like always."

She wore that comically tormented expression of hers, and I laughed. "At least I left them where you could find them this time." My humor suddenly dimmed. "Did anyone . . . any other humans notice or hear?"

"I got rid of the bodies before anyone saw," she said. "If people heard anything . . . Well, backwoods places like that are always filled with superstitions and ghost stories. They don't have factual evidence of vampires, per se, but there's always sort of this belief that the supernatural and dangerous are out there. Little do they know."

She said "ghost stories" without any change of expression. I wondered if she'd seen any of the spirits last night but finally decided she probably hadn't. She'd come outside near the tail end of the fight, and if past evidence was any indication, nobody else could see the spirits I saw—except Strigoi, as it turned out.

"You must have had some good training then," said Karolina, shifting so the

baby leaned against her shoulder. “You look like you should still be in school.”

“Just got out,” I said, earning another scrutinizing look from Sydney.

“You’re American,” said Olena matter-of-factly. “What in the world could bring you out here?”

“I . . . I’m looking for someone,” I said after a few moments’ hesitation.

I was afraid they were going to press for details or that she too would have blood whore suspicions, but just then, the kitchen door opened and Dimitri’s grandmother, Yeva, walked in. She had poked her head in earlier and scared the hell out of me. Dimitri had told me that she was a witch of sorts, and I could believe it. She looked like she was a gazillion years old and was so thin, it was a wonder the wind didn’t blow her away. She barely stood five feet tall, and her hair covered her head in patchy gray wisps. But it was her eyes that truly frightened me. The rest of her might be frail, but those dark eyes were sharp and alert and seemed to bore into my soul. Even without Dimitri’s explanation, I would have taken her for a witch. She was also the only one in the household who didn’t speak English.

She sat down at one of the empty chairs, and Olena hastily jumped up to get some more blini. Yeva muttered something in Russian that made the others look uncomfortable. Sydney’s lips twitched into a small smile. Yeva’s eyes were on me as she spoke, and I glanced around for translation. “What?” I asked.

“Grandmother says you’re not telling us the whole truth about why you’re here. She says the longer you delay, the worse it will be,” Viktoria explained. She then gave Sydney an apologetic look. “And she wants to know when the Alchemist is leaving.”

“As soon as possible,” said Sydney dryly.

“Well, why I’m here . . . it’s kind of a long story.” Could I be any vaguer?

Yeva said something else, and Olena retorted with what sounded like a chastisement. To me, she spoke gently: “Ignore her, Rose. She’s in one of her moods. Why you’re here is your own business—although I’m sure Abe would like to talk to you at some point.” She frowned slightly, and I was reminded of the earlier looks at the table. “You should make sure you thank him. He seemed very concerned about you.”

“I’d kind of like to see him too,” I mumbled, still curious about this well-protected, non-royal Moroi who had given me a ride and seemed to make everyone uneasy. Eager to avoid more talk of why I was here, I hastily changed the subject. “I’d also love to look around Baia. I’ve never been in a place like this before—where so many dhampirs live, I mean.”

Viktoria brightened. “I can definitely give you a tour—if you’re sure you’re feeling okay. Or if you don’t have to leave right away.”

She believed I was passing through, which was just as well. Honestly, I wasn’t sure what I was doing anymore, now that it seemed likely Dimitri wasn’t in the area. I glanced at Sydney questioningly.

She shrugged. “Do whatever you want. I’m not going anywhere.” I found that a little disconcerting too. She’d brought me here as her superiors had told her to do—but now what? Well, that was a concern for later.

As soon as I finished my food, Viktoria practically dragged me out the door, as if I was the most exciting thing that had happened around here in a while.

Yeva hadn't taken her eyes off me for the rest of the meal, and even though she'd never said anything else, her suspicious look clearly told me she didn't believe a word I'd said. I invited Sydney along on the outing, but she declined, choosing instead to lock herself away in a bedroom to read about Greek temples or make world-controlling phone calls or do whatever it was she did.

Viktoria said downtown wasn't far from where they lived and was easy to walk to. The day was clear and cool, with enough sun to make being outside pretty pleasant.

"We don't get a lot of visitors," she explained. "Except for Moroi men, but most don't stay long."

She added no more, but I wondered about her implications. Were these Moroi men off to find some action with dhampir women? I'd grown up thinking of these women, dhampirs who chose not to become guardians, as disgraceful and dirty. The ones in the Nightingale had certainly met the blood whore stereotype, but Dimitri had assured me that not all dhampir women were like that. After meeting the Belikovs, I believed him.

As we approached the center of town, I soon discovered another myth shattered. People always talked about blood whores living in camps or communes, but that wasn't the case here. Baia wasn't huge, not like Saint Petersburg or even Omsk, but it was a real town with a large human population. Hardly a rural camp or farm settlement. The whole setting was astonishingly normal, and when we reached downtown, lined with small shops and restaurants, it too seemed like any other place in the world people might live. Modern and ordinary, just with a slight village feel.

"Where are all the dhampirs?" I wondered aloud. Sydney had said there was a secret dhampir subculture, but I saw no signs of it.

Viktoria smiled. "Oh, they're here. We have a lot of businesses and other places that humans don't know about." While I could understand dhampirs going unnoticed in big cities, it seemed remarkable to pull that off here. "And lots of us just live and work with humans." She nodded over toward what looked like a drugstore. "That's where Sonya works now."

"Now?"

"Now that she's pregnant." Viktoria rolled her eyes. "I'd take you to meet her, but she's grumpy all the time lately. I hope the baby's early."

She left it at that, and I again wondered about the dynamics of dhampirs and Moroi here. We didn't mention it again, and our conversation stayed light and even teasing. Viktoria was easy to like, and in only an hour, we'd clicked as though we'd known each other forever. Maybe my connection to Dimitri bound me to his family, too.

My thoughts were cut off when someone called Viktoria's name. We turned to see a very cute dhampir guy crossing the street. He had bronze hair and dark eyes, his age falling somewhere between mine and Viktoria's.

He said something chatty and conversational to her. She grinned at him and then gestured to me, giving my introduction in Russian. "This is Nikolai," she told me in English.

"Nice to meet you," he said, also switching languages. He gave me a quick assessment in the way guys often do, but when he turned back to Viktoria, it was clear who the object of his affections was. "You should bring Rose to

Marina's party. It's Sunday night." He hesitated, turning a bit shy. "You're going, aren't you?"

Viktoria turned thoughtful, and I realized she was completely oblivious to his crush. "I'll be there, but . . ." She turned to me. "Will you still be around?"

"I don't know," I said honestly. "But I'll go if I'm still here. What kind of party is it?"

"Marina's a friend from school," explained Viktoria. "We're just going to get together and celebrate before we go back."

"To school?" I asked stupidly. Somehow, it had never occurred to me that the dhampirs out here would be in school.

"We're on break right now," said Nikolai. "For Easter."

"Oh." It was late April, but I had no clue what day Easter fell on this year. I'd lost track of the days. It hadn't happened yet, so their school must have their break the week before Easter. St. Vladimir's took its vacation afterward. "Where is your school?"

"It's about three hours away. Even more remote than here." Viktoria made a face.

"Baia's not so bad," teased Nikolai.

"Easy for you to say. You'll eventually leave and go see new and exciting places."

"Can't you?" I asked her.

She frowned, suddenly uncomfortable. "Well, I *could* . . . but that's not how we do it here—at least not in my family. Grandmother has some . . . strong opinions about men and women. Nikolai will be a guardian, but I'll stay here with my family."

Nikolai suddenly gave me a new appraisal. "Are you a guardian?"

"Ah, well." Now I was the uncomfortable one.

Viktoria spoke before I could come up with anything to say. "She killed two Strigoi outside of town. By herself."

He looked impressed. "You *are* a guardian."

"Well, no . . . I've killed before, but I'm not actually sworn." Turning around, I lifted up my hair to show them my neck. In addition to all my regular *molnija* marks, I also had the little star-shaped tattoo that meant I'd been in a battle. They both gasped, and Nikolai said something in Russian. I let my hair drop and looked back. "What?"

"You're . . ." Viktoria bit her lip, eyes contemplative as she groped for what she wanted to say. "Unpromised? I don't know the English word."

"Unpromised?" I said. "I guess . . . but technically, aren't all the women here?"

"Even if we aren't guardians, we still get marks showing we completed our training. No promise mark, though. For you to have killed so many Strigoi and have no loyalties to a school or the guardians . . ." Viktoria shrugged. "We call it being unpromised—it's a strange thing."

"It's strange where I come from too," I admitted. Unheard of, really. So much so, that we didn't have a term for it. It just wasn't done.

"I should let you two go," said Nikolai, his lovesick eyes back on Viktoria. "But I'll see you at Marina's for sure? Maybe sooner?"

"Yes," she agreed. They said their farewells in Russian, and then he loped

off across the street with the kind of easy, athletic grace guardians often acquired with training. It reminded me a bit of Dimitri's.

"I must have scared him off," I said.

"No, he thinks you're exciting."

"Not as exciting as he thinks you are."

Her eyebrows rose. "What?"

"He likes you . . . I mean, *really* likes. Can't you tell?"

"Oh. We're just friends."

I could tell from her attitude that she meant it. She was completely indifferent to him, which was too bad. He was cute and nice. Letting poor Nikolai go, I brought up the guardians again. I was intrigued by the different attitudes around here. "You said you can't . . . but do you *want* to be a guardian?"

She hesitated. "I've never really considered it. I get all the same training at school, and I like being able to defend myself. But I'd rather use it in defense of my family than Moroi. I guess it sounds . . ." She paused again to think of the right word. ". . . Sexist? But, the men become guardians, and women stay at home. Only my brother left."

I nearly tripped. "Your brother?" I asked, keeping my voice as steady as possible.

"Dimitri," she said. "He's older than me and has been a guardian for a while. He's over in the United States, actually. We haven't seen him in a long time."

"Huh."

I felt horrible and guilty. Guilty because I was keeping the truth from Viktoria and the others. Horrible because apparently no one from back home had bothered to pass the news on to his family yet. Smiling at her own memories, she didn't notice my change in mood.

"Paul actually looks exactly like he did at that age. I should show you pictures of him—and some recent ones, too. Dimitri's pretty cute. For my brother, I mean."

I was sure seeing pictures of Dimitri as a little boy would rip my heart out. As it was, the more Viktoria began to talk about him, the sicker I felt. She had no clue about what had happened, and even though it had been a couple of years since she'd seen him, it was clear she and the rest of the family loved him like crazy. Not that that should be a surprise. (And really, who couldn't love Dimitri?) Being around them just one morning had shown me how close they all were. I knew from Dimitri's stories that he was crazy about all of them, too.

"Rose? Are you okay?" Viktoria was peering at me with concern, probably because I hadn't said anything in the last ten minutes.

We had circled around and were almost back at her house. Looking at her, at her open, friendly face and eyes that were so much like Dimitri's, I realized I had another task ahead of me before I could go after Dimitri, wherever he was. I swallowed.

"I . . . yeah. I think . . . I think I need to sit down with you and the rest of your family."

"Okay," she said, the worry still in her voice.

Inside the house, Olena was bustling around the kitchen with Karolina. I thought they were making plans for tonight's dinner, which was startling considering we'd just finished a huge breakfast. I could definitely get used to the way they ate around here. In the living room, Paul was building an elaborate racetrack out of Legos. Yeva sat in a rocking chair and appeared to be the world's most stereotypical grandmother as she knit a pair of socks. Except most grandmothers didn't look like they could incinerate you with a single glance.

Olena was talking to Karolina in Russian but switched to English when she saw me. "You two are back earlier than I expected."

"We saw the town," said Viktoria. "And . . . Rose wanted to talk to you. To all of us."

Olena gave me a look as puzzled and concerned as Viktoria's. "What's going on?"

The weight of all those Belikov eyes on me made my heart start thumping in my chest. How was I going to do this? How could I explain something I hadn't spoken about in weeks? I couldn't stand to put them—or myself—through it. When Yeva scuttled in, it made things that much worse. Maybe she'd had some mystical sense that something big was about to go down.

"We should sit," I said.

Paul stayed in the living room, for which I was grateful. I was pretty sure I couldn't handle saying what I had to with a little kid—one who looked like Dimitri, apparently—watching me.

"Rose, what's wrong?" asked Olena. She looked so sweet and, well . . . motherly, that I nearly cried. Whenever I'd been angry with my own mother for not being around or doing a good job, I'd always compared her to some idealized image of a mom—a mom who seemed a lot like Dimitri's, I realized. Dimitri's sisters looked equally worried, like I was someone they'd known forever. That acceptance and concern made my eyes burn even more, seeing as they'd just met me this morning. Yeva wore a very strange expression, however—almost like she'd been expecting something like this all along.

"Well . . . the thing is, the reason I came here, to Baia, was to find you guys."

That wasn't entirely true. I'd come to search for Dimitri. I'd never thought much about finding his family, but now, I realized that it was a good thing I had.

"You see, Viktoria was talking about Dimitri earlier." Olena's face brightened when I said her son's name. "And . . . I knew—er, know him. He used to be a guardian at my school. My teacher, actually."

Karolina and Viktoria lit up as well. "How is he?" asked Karolina. "It's been ages since we've seen him. Do you know when he's going to visit?"

I couldn't even think about answering her question, so I pushed forward with my story before I lost my courage in front of all those loving faces. As the words came out of my mouth, it was almost like someone else was saying them and I was simply watching from a distance. "A month ago . . . our school was attacked by Strigoi. A really bad attack . . . a huge group of Strigoi. We lost a lot of people—Moroi and dhampirs, both."

Olena exclaimed in Russia. Viktoria leaned toward me. "St. Vladimir's?"

I halted in my story, surprised. “You’ve heard of it?”

“Everyone’s heard of it,” said Karolina. “We all know what happened. That was your school? You were there that night?”

I nodded.

“No wonder you have so many *molnija* marks,” breathed Viktoria in wonder.

“And that’s where Dimitri’s at now?” asked Olena. “We lost track of his latest assignment.”

“Um, yeah . . .” My tongue felt thick in my throat. I couldn’t breathe. “I was at the school the night of the attack,” I reaffirmed. “And so was Dimitri. He was one of the leaders in the battle . . . and the way he fought . . . he was . . . he was so brave . . . and . . .”

My words were breaking up, but by this point, the others were catching on. Olena gasped and again murmured in Russian. I picked out the word for “God.” Karolina sat frozen, but Viktoria leaned toward me. Those eyes that were so like her brother’s stared at me intently, as intently as he would if pushing me to tell the truth, no matter how awful.

“What happened?” she demanded. “What happened to Dimitri?”

I looked away from their faces, my eyes drifting to the living room. On the far wall, I caught sight of a bookcase filled with old, leather-covered books. They had gold-embossed lettering on the spines. It was totally random, but I suddenly remembered Dimitri mentioning those. *They were these old adventure novels my mother collected*, he’d told me once. *The covers were so beautiful, and I loved them. If I was careful, she’d let me read them sometimes.* The thought of a young Dimitri sitting in front of that bookcase, carefully turning the pages—and oh, he would have been careful—almost made me lose it. Had that been where he’d developed his love of western novels?

I was losing it. I was getting distracted. I wasn’t going to be able to tell them the truth. My emotions were growing too powerful, my memories flooding me as I fought to think about something—anything—that didn’t involve that horrible battle.

Then I glanced at Yeva again, and something about her eerie, knowing expression inexplicably spurred me on. I had to do this. I turned back to the others. “He fought really bravely in the battle, and afterward, he helped lead a rescue mission to save some people that the Strigoi had captured. He was really amazing there, too, only . . . he . . .”

I stopped again and realized tears were running down my cheeks. In my mind, I was replaying that awful scene in the cave, with Dimitri so close to freedom and taken by a Strigoi at the last minute. Shaking that thought away, I took another deep breath. I had to finish this. I owed it to his family.

There was no gentle way to say it. “One of the Strigoi there ... well, he overpowered Dimitri.”

Karolina buried her face in her mother’s shoulder, and Olena made no effort to hide her own tears. Viktoria wasn’t crying, but her face had gone perfectly still. She was working hard to keep her emotions in check, just as Dimitri would have. She searched my face, needing to know for sure.

“Dimitri is dead,” she said.

It was a statement, not a question, but she was looking to me for confirmation. I wondered if I’d given away something, some hint that there

was still more to the story. Or maybe she just needed the certainty of those words. And for a moment, I considered telling them that Dimitri was dead. It was what the Academy would tell them, what the guardians would tell them. It would be easier on them . . . but somehow, I couldn't stand to lie to them—even if it was a comforting lie. Dimitri would have wanted the whole truth, and his family would too.

"No," I said, and for a heartbeat, hope sprang up in everyone's faces—at least until I spoke again. "Dimitri's a Strigoi."

EIGHT

THE REACTIONS WERE MIXED among Dimitri's family members. Some cried. Some were stunned. And some—mainly Yeva and Viktoria—simply took it in and kept their emotions from their faces, just as Dimitri would have done. That upset me almost as much as the tears; it reminded me too much of him. Out of all of them, pregnant Sonya—who came home shortly after the news broke—had the most intense physical reaction. She ran sobbing to her room and wouldn't come out.

It didn't take long, however, for Yeva and Olena to spring into action. They spoke rapidly in Russian, clearly planning something. Phone calls were made, and Viktoria was dispatched to run an errand. No one seemed to need me, so I mostly wandered the house and tried to stay out of the way.

I found myself studying the shelves I'd seen earlier, running my hands along the leather-bound books. The titles were in Cyrillic, but it didn't matter. Touching them and imagining Dimitri having held and read them somehow made me feel closer to him.

"Looking for a little light reading?" Sydney walked up and stood beside me. She hadn't been around earlier but had heard the news.

"Very light, seeing as I don't understand any of them," I replied. I gestured to the scurrying family members. "What's going on here?"

"They're planning Dimitri's funeral," Sydney explained. "Or, well, his memorial service."

I frowned. "But he's not dead—"

"Shh." She cut me off with a sharp gesture and glanced warily at the others as they hustled around. "Don't say that."

"But it's true," I hissed back.

She shook her head. "Not to them. Out here . . . out in these villages . . . there's no in-between state. You're alive or you're dead. They aren't going to acknowledge him being one of . . . *those*." She couldn't keep the disgust out of her voice. "For all intents and purposes, he is dead to them. They'll mourn him and move on. So should you." I didn't take offense at her blunt attitude because I knew she hadn't meant to give any. It was just her way.

The problem was, that in-between state was very real to me, and there was no way I could move on. Not yet.

"Rose . . ." began Sydney after several seconds of silence. She wouldn't meet my eyes. "I'm sorry."

"You mean, for Dimitri?"

"Yeah . . . I had no idea. I haven't really been that nice to you. I mean, I'm

not going to act like I feel any better about hanging out with your kind, but you guys are still . . . well, not human, obviously. But . . . I don't know. You still have feelings; you still love and hurt. And while we were coming here, you had all this horrible news in you, and I didn't make it any easier for you. So I'm sorry for that. And I'm sorry for thinking the worst of you."

At first, I thought she was talking about thinking I was evil, but then I got it. She'd thought this whole time that I really was coming to be a blood whore and now believed delivering the news to Dimitri's family had been my only purpose. I didn't bother to correct her.

"Thanks, but you couldn't have known. And honestly, if I were in your place . . . I don't know. I'd probably act the same way."

"No," she said. "You wouldn't. You're always nice to people."

I gave her an incredulous look. "Have you been traveling with someone else these last few days? Back home, I've got a reputation for not always being so nice. I've got attitude, and I know it."

She smiled. "Yeah, you do. But you also say the right things to people when you have to. Telling the Belikovs what you did . . . well, that was hard. And no matter what you say, you *can* be polite and go out of your way to make people feel good. Most of the time."

I was a bit startled. Was that how I appeared? I often thought of myself as a trigger-happy queen bitch and tried to think about my behavior with her these last few days. I had sparred with her a lot, but among the others we'd met, I supposed I had been friendly.

"Well, thanks," I said, not knowing what else to say.

"Did you see Abe yet? When you walked around town?"

"No," I said, realizing I'd forgotten about my mysterious rescuer. "Should I have?"

"I just figured he'd find you."

"Who is he? Why did he come get us when you told him I was hurt?"

Sydney hesitated, and I thought I was going to get some more of the Alchemist silent treatment. Then, after glancing around uneasily, she said in a low voice, "Abe's not royal, but he's a really important guy. He's not Russian either, but he's in the country a lot, always on business—both illegal and legal, I think. He's friends with all the important Moroi, and half the time, it seems like he controls the Alchemists, too. I know he's involved in the process of making our tattoos . . . but his business goes far beyond that. We have a name for him behind his back . . . *Zmey*."

"Zma what?" I had barely heard the word. It sounded like *zz-may*. It was certainly nothing I'd ever heard before.

She gave a small smile at my confusion. "*Zmey* is Russian for 'snake.' But not just any snake." Her eyes narrowed as she pondered a better explanation. "It's a term used in lots of myths. Sometimes for giant snakes heroes have to battle. There are also a few stories about wizards with snake blood who get called that. The snake in the Garden of Eden? Who made Eve fall? He was called a *zmey* too."

I shivered. Okay, that was pretty freaky, but it made something click into place. The Alchemists allegedly had ties to leaders and authorities, and Abe apparently wielded a lot of influence with them. "Is Abe the one who wanted

you to come with me to Baia? The reason the Alchemists made you come here?"

Again, she paused, then nodded. "Yeah . . . when I called that night in Saint Petersburg, I was told there was a search going on for you. Abe gave orders through the Alchemists for me to stay with you until he could meet up with us here. He's apparently been searching for you on someone's behalf."

I went cold. My fears were being realized. People *had* been looking for me. But who? If Lissa had initiated a manhunt, I would have sensed it when I visited her mind. I didn't think it was Adrian either, not from the way he seemed so desperate and clueless about my whereabouts. Plus, he seemed to accept my need for this quest.

So who was looking for me? And for what reason? This Abe sounded like a high-ranking person—albeit someone involved in shady business—someone who might very well be connected to the queen or others almost as important. Had he been ordered to find me and bring me back? Or—considering how much the queen hated me—had he perhaps been ordered to make sure I *didn't* come back? Was I dealing with an assassin? Sydney certainly seemed to regard him with a weird mix of fear and respect.

"Maybe I don't want to meet him," I said.

"I don't think he'll hurt you. I mean, if he wanted to, he already would have. But be careful. He's always playing several games at once, and he deals in enough secrets to rival the Alchemists."

"So you don't trust him?"

She gave me a rueful grin as she turned to walk away. "You forget: I don't trust any of you."

When she was gone, I decided to go outside, away from the sorrow and business indoors. I sat down on the top step of the backyard porch, watching Paul play. He was building a fort for some of his action figures. While sensitive to the grief in his family, it was hard for him to be too affected by the "death" of an uncle he'd only met a couple of times. The news didn't mean as much to him as it did to the rest of us.

With so much time on my hands for the rest of the day, I decided to do a quick check-in with Lissa. In spite of myself, I was kind of curious about how things had panned out with Avery Lazar.

While Lissa's intentions were good, she'd still had some misgivings about bringing Avery along to lunch. And yet, she was pleasantly surprised to see Avery fitting in perfectly, charming both Adrian and Christian. Admittedly, Adrian was impressed by pretty much anything female. Christian was harder to crack, but even he seemed to be growing fond of her—probably because she kept teasing Adrian. Anyone who could make a joke at Adrian's expense ranked high on Christian's list.

"So, explain this," Avery said, winding linguine around her fork. "You just, what, hang around the Academy all day? Are you trying to redo your high school experience?"

"Nothing to redo," said Adrian loftily. "I totally ruled my high school. I was worshipped and adored—not that that should come as a shock." Beside him, Christian nearly choked on his food.

"So . . . you're trying to relive your glory days. It's all gone downhill since

then, huh?"

"No way," said Adrian. "I'm like a fine wine. I get better with age. The best is yet to come."

"Seems like it'd get old after a while," said Avery, apparently not convinced by the compelling wine simile. "I'm certainly bored, and I even spend part of the day helping my dad."

"Adrian sleeps most of the day," noted Lissa, trying to keep a straight face. "So he doesn't actually have to worry about finding things to do."

"Hey, I spend a good portion of my time helping *you* unravel the mysteries of spirit," Adrian reminded her.

Avery leaned forward, curiosity all over her pretty face. "So it's actually real? I heard stories about spirit . . . about how you can heal people?"

It took Lissa a moment to respond. She wasn't sure she'd ever get used to her magic being out in the open now. "Among other things. We're still figuring it out."

Adrian was more eager than she was to discuss it—probably in the hopes of impressing Avery—and provided a quick rundown of some of spirit's abilities, like auras and compulsion. "And," he added, "I can visit people in their dreams."

Christian held up a hand. "Stop. I can feel there's a comment coming on about how women already dream about you. I just ate, you know."

"I wasn't going to go there," said Adrian. But he kind of looked like he wished he'd thought of the joke first. I couldn't help being a little amused. Adrian was so brash and flippant in public . . . and then, in my dreams, he'd show that serious and concerned side. He was more complex than anyone gave him credit for.

Avery looked floored. "Man. I used to think using air was cool. I guess not." A small breeze suddenly blew her hair back, making her look as though she were posing for a swimsuit photo shoot. She gave the group a dazzling smile. All that was missing was a photographer.

The sound of the bell made them all stand up. Christian realized he'd left homework in another class and hurried off to get it—after kissing Lissa goodbye, of course.

Adrian departed equally as fast. "The teachers start giving me dirty looks if I hang around once classes start." He gave Lissa and Avery a small half-bow. "Until next time, ladies."

Avery, who couldn't care less about what teachers thought, walked with Lissa to her next class. The older girl's face was thoughtful. "So . . . you really are *with* Christian, right?" Was she ever. If Avery'd seen half the things I'd seen Christian and Lissa do through the bond, there'd be no question.

Lissa laughed. "Yes, why?"

Avery hesitated, piquing Lissa's curiosity. "Well . . . I heard that you were involved with Adrian."

Lissa nearly stopped walking. "Where did you hear that?"

"At Court. The queen was saying how happy she is about you guys being a couple and how you're always together."

Lissa groaned. "That's because whenever I go to Court, she invites him too and then sends us both off to do things for her. It's not by choice . . . well, I

mean, don't get me wrong. I don't mind spending time with him, but the reason we're always together there is because Tatiana makes us."

"She seems to like you, though. She talks about you all the time, about how much potential you have and how proud she is of you."

"I think she's proud to manipulate me. Going there is such a pain. She either completely ignores the fact that I'm dating Christian or takes whatever chance she can get to slip in insults about him." Queen Tatiana, like so many other people, could never forgive Christian's parents for willingly turning Strigoi.

"Sorry," said Avery, looking like she felt really bad. "I didn't mean to bring up a bad subject. I just kind of wanted to know if Adrian was available, that's all."

Lissa wasn't mad at Avery. Her fury was turned toward the queen, at how she assumed everyone would behave the way she wanted and dance when she commanded it. The Moroi world had been ruled by a king or a queen since the beginning of time, and sometimes, Lissa thought it was time for a change. They needed a system where everyone had an equal say—royal and non-royal alike. Even the dhampirs.

The more she thought about it, the more she felt her temper spike, anger and frustration flaring up in a way more common to me than her. It made her want to scream sometimes, to walk right up to Tatiana and tell her their deal was off. No college was worth this. Maybe she'd even tell Tatiana that it was time for a revolution, time to overturn the Moroi's backward—

Lissa blinked, astonished to find she was shaking. Where had that emotion come from? It was one thing to be upset with Tatiana, but this . . . ? She hadn't had such out-of-control rages since she first began using spirit. With a deep breath, she tried to use some of the calming techniques she'd acquired so that Avery wouldn't know what a nutcase she'd nearly turned into.

"I just hate people talking about me, that's all," Lissa said at last.

Avery hadn't seemed to notice Lissa's lapse into anger. "Well, if it makes you feel better, not everyone thinks that about you. I met a girl . . . Mia? Yeah, that was her name. Some non-royal." Avery's dismissive tone suggested she held the view a lot of royals had toward "common" Moroi. "She just laughed about you and Adrian being together. Said it was ridiculous."

Lissa almost smiled at that. Mia had once been Lissa's rival and a self-centered brat. But after Strigoi killed her mother, Mia had taken on a fierce, determined attitude, one both Lissa and I liked immensely. Mia lived at Court with her father, secretly training to fight so that she would be able to battle Strigoi some day.

"Oh," said Avery suddenly. "There's Simon. I should go."

Lissa looked across the hall and saw Avery's stern guardian. Simon might not be as grim as Avery's brother Reed, but he still had that same stiff and dour look he'd had when Lissa first met him. Avery seemed to get along with him fine, though.

"Okay," said Lissa. "I'll see you later."

"You bet," said Avery, starting to turn.

"Oh, and Avery?"

Avery glanced at Lissa. "Yeah?"

"Adrian *is* available."

Avery's only answer was a quick grin before she headed off to join Simon.

Back with the Belikovs in Baia, the memorial service was going forward. Neighbors and friends, all dhampirs, slowly arrived, many bringing food. It was my first glimpse of the dhampir community, though it still didn't seem as mysterious as Sydney had implied. The kitchen turned into a banquet hall, with every counter and table surface covered in dishes. Some were foods I knew, and there were lots of desserts—cookies and pastries covered in nuts and icing that smelled freshly baked. Some of the dishes I'd never seen before and wasn't sure I wanted to ever again. There was a slimy bowl of cabbage in particular that I went out of my way to avoid.

But before we ate, everyone went outside and gathered in a semicircle in the backyard. It was the only place that could accomodate so many people. A priest appeared just then, a human one. That surprised me a little, but I supposed when living in a human town, dhampirs would attend a human church. And to most humans, dhampirs looked just like them, so the priest no doubt thought he was making an ordinary house call. A handful of Moroi who had been in town were also present, but they, too, could more or less pass for humans—pale ones—if they were discreet with the fangs. Humans didn't expect to see the supernatural, so their minds rarely considered it an option, even when it was right in front of them.

Everyone grew silent. It was sunset now, with orange fire burning in the western sky, and shadows falling across all of us. The priest performed a funeral service in Russian, chanting in a voice that sounded unearthly in the darkening yard.

All the church services I'd ever attended were in English, but I could see how this had the same feel. Every so often, those gathered would cross themselves. I didn't know the cues, so I simply watched and waited, letting the priest's mournful voice fill my soul. My feelings for Dimitri churned within me like a growing storm, and I worked to keep them in, locked up in my heart. When the service finally finished, the eerie tension that had engulfed the group dispersed. People moved again, hugging the Belikovs and shaking hands with the priest. He left shortly thereafter.

Food followed. Plates were loaded up, and everyone sat wherever they could find space, be it inside the house or in the backyard. None of the guests really knew me, and Dimitri's family was far too busy to pay much attention to me as they ran around and tried to make everyone feel welcome. Sydney stayed with me a lot of the time, and while conversation was light between us, I took comfort in her presence. We sat on the living room floor, leaning against the wall near the bookcase. She picked over her food, like always, which made me smile. There was something soothing about that familiar habit.

When dinner was over, people continued chatting in small groups. I couldn't understand any of it, but I kept hearing his name mentioned: *Dimitri, Dimitri*. It reminded me of the incomprehensible hissing that the ghosts made during their visits. It was oppressive and smothering, the force of his name pressing on my heart. *Dimitri, Dimitri.* After a while, it grew to be too much. Sydney had stepped away for a bit, so I went outside to get some air. Some people had

built a bonfire in the back and were sitting around it, still talking about Dimitri, so I headed off toward the front yard.

I walked down the street, not intending to go far. The night was warm and clear, with the moon and stars burning brightly in the blackness above me. My feelings were tangled up, and now that I was away from the others, I allowed a bit of that pent-up emotion to burst forth, coming out as silent tears on my cheeks. When I was a couple of houses away, I sat down on the curb, resting and enjoying the stillness around me. My peace was short-lived, however—my sharp ears picked up the sound of voices coming from the Belikov house. Three figures appeared. One, tall and slim, was Moroi, and the others were dhampirs. I stared as they came to a stop in front of me. Not bothering with formalities, I remained where I was, looking up into the Moroi's dark eyes. I didn't recognize this group from the service—but I did recognize the Moroi from somewhere else. I gave him a wry half-smile.

"Abe Mazur, I presume."

NINE

"I THOUGHT YOU WERE A DREAM," I SAID.

They all remained standing, the dhampirs fanning out around the Moroi in a sort of protective formation. Abe's was the strange face I'd seen while I'd been going in and out of consciousness after the fight by the barn. He was older than me, close to Olena's age. He had black hair and a goatee, and about as tan a complexion as Moroi ever had. If you've ever seen tan or dark-skinned people who are sick and grow pale, it's a lot like that. There was some pigment in his skin, but it was underscored by an intense pallor. Most astonishing of all was his clothing. He wore a long dark coat that screamed money, paired with a cashmere crimson scarf. Below it, I could see a bit of gold, a chain to match the gold hoop earring he wore in one of his ears. My initial impression of that flamboyance would have been pirate or pimp. A moment later, I changed my mind. Something about him said he was the kind of guy who broke kneecaps to get his way.

"Dream, eh? That," the Moroi said, with the very slightest hint of a smile, "is not something I hear very often. Well, no." He reconsidered. "I do occasionally show up in people's nightmares." He was neither American nor Russian; I couldn't identify the accent.

Was he trying to impress me or intimidate me with his big, bad reputation? Sydney hadn't been afraid of him, exactly, but she'd certainly possessed a healthy amount of wariness.

"Well, I assume you already know who I am," I said. "So, the question now is, what are you doing here?"

"No," he said, the smile turning harder. "The question is, what are *you* doing here?"

I gestured back to the house, trying to play it cool. "I'm going to a funeral."

"That's not why you came to Russia."

"I came to Russia to tell the Belikovs that Dimitri was dead, seeing as no one else bothered to." That was turning into a handy explanation for me being here, but as Abe studied me, a chill ran down my spine, kind of like when Yeva looked at me. Like that crazy old woman, he didn't believe me, and again I felt the dangerous edge to his otherwise jovial personality.

Abe shook his head, and now the smile was gone altogether. "That's not the reason either. Don't lie to me, little girl."

I felt my hackles going up. "And don't interrogate me, old man. Not unless you're ready to tell me why you and your sidekicks risked driving that road to pick up Sydney and me." Abe's dhampirs stiffened at the words *old man*, but to

my surprise, he actually smiled again—though the smile didn't reach his eyes.

"Maybe I was just helping out."

"Not from what I hear. You're the one who had the Alchemists send Sydney with me here."

"Oh?" He arched an eyebrow. "Did she tell you that? Mmm . . . that was bad behavior on her part. Her superiors aren't going to like that. Not at all."

Oh, damn. I'd spoken without thinking. I didn't want Sydney to get in trouble. If Abe really was some kind of Moroi Godfather type—what had she called him? *Zmey?* The snake?—I didn't doubt he could talk to other Alchemists to make her life even more miserable.

"I forced it out of her," I lied. "I . . . I threatened her on the train. It wasn't hard. She's already scared to death of me."

"I don't doubt she is. They're all scared of us, bound by centuries of tradition and hiding behind their crosses to protect them—despite the gifts they get from their tattoos. In a lot of ways, they get the same traits as you dhampirs—just no reproductive issues." He gazed up at the stars as he spoke, like some sort of philosopher musing on the mysteries of the universe. Somehow, that made me angrier. He was treating this like a joke, when clearly he had some agenda regarding me. I didn't like being part of anyone's plans—particularly when I didn't know what those plans were.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm sure we could talk about the Alchemists and how you control them all night," I snapped. "But I still want to know what you want with me."

"Nothing," he said simply.

"Nothing? You've gone to a lot of trouble to set me up with Sydney and follow me here for nothing."

He looked back down from the sky, and there was a dangerous glint in his eyes. "You're of no interest to me. I have my own business to run. I come on behalf of *others* who are interested in you."

I stiffened, and at last, true fear ran through me. Shit. There *was* a manhunt out for me. But who? Lissa? Adrian? Tatiana? Again, that last one made me nervous. The others would seek me out because they cared. But Tatiana . . . Tatiana feared I'd run off with Adrian. Once more I thought that if she wanted me found, it might be because she wanted to ensure I didn't come back. Abe struck me as the kind of person who could make people disappear.

"And what do the others want? Do they want me home?" I asked, trying to appear unafraid. "Did you think you could just come here and drag me back to the U.S.?"

That secretive smile of Abe's returned. "Do *you* think I could just drag you back?"

"Well," I scoffed, again without thinking, "*you* couldn't. Your guys here could. Well, maybe. I might be able to take them."

Abe laughed out loud for the first time, a rich, deep sound filled with sincere amusement. "You live up to your brash reputation. Delightful." Great. Abe probably had a whole file on me somewhere. He probably knew what I liked for breakfast. "I'll make a trade with you. Tell me why you're here, and I'll tell you why I'm here."

"I already told you."

In a flash, the laughter was gone. He took a step closer to where I sat, and I saw his guardians tense. “And I told you not to lie to me. You’ve got a reason for being here. I need to know what it is.”

“Rose? Can you come in here?”

Back toward the Belikov house, Viktoria’s clear voice rang out in the night. Glancing behind me, I saw her standing in the doorway. Suddenly, I wanted to get away from Abe. There was something lethal underneath that gaudy, jovial façade, and I didn’t want to spend another minute with him. Leaping up, I began backing toward the house, half-expecting his guardians to come kidnap me, despite his words. The two guys stayed where they were, but their eyes watched me carefully. Abe’s quirky smile returned to his face.

“Sorry I can’t stay and chat,” I said.

“That’s all right,” he said grandly. “We’ll find time later.”

“Not likely,” I said. He laughed, and I hastily followed Viktoria into the house, not feeling safe until I shut the door. “I do *not* like that guy.”

“Abe?” she asked. “I thought he was your friend.”

“Hardly. He’s some kind of mobster, right?”

“I suppose,” she said, like it was no big deal. “But he’s the reason you’re here.”

“Yeah, I know about him coming to get us.”

Viktoria shook her head. “No, I mean *here*. I guess while you were in the car, you kept saying, ‘Belikov, Belikov.’ Abe figured you knew us. That’s why he took you to our house.”

That was startling. I’d been dreaming of Dimitri, so of course I would have said his last name. But I’d had no idea that was how I’d ended up here. I’d figured it was because Olena had medical training.

Then Viktoria added the most astonishing thing of all. “When he realized we didn’t know you, he was going to take you somewhere else—but grandmother said we had to keep you. I guess she’d had some dream that you’d come to us.”

“What?” Crazy, creepy Yeva who hated me? “Yeva dreamed about me?”

Viktoria nodded. “It’s this gift she has. Are you sure you don’t know Abe? He’s too big-time to be here without a reason.”

Olena hurried over to us before I could respond. She caught hold of my arm. “We’ve been looking for you. What took so long?” This question was directed to Viktoria.

“Abe was—”

Olena shook her head. “Never mind. Come on. Everyone’s waiting.”

“For what?” I asked, letting her drag me through the house to the backyard.

“I was supposed to tell you,” explained Viktoria, scurrying along. “This is the part where everyone sits and remembers Dimitri by telling stories.”

“Nobody’s seen him in so long; we don’t know what’s happened to him recently,” said Olena. “We need you to tell us.”

I flinched. Me? I balked at that, particularly when we emerged outside and I saw all those faces around the campfire. I didn’t know any of them. How could I talk about Dimitri? How could I reveal what was closest to my heart? Everyone seemed to blur together, and I thought I might faint. For the moment, none of them noticed me. Karolina was speaking, her baby in her

arms. Every so often she'd pause, and the others would laugh. Viktoria sat down on a blanket-covered spot on the ground and pulled me down beside her. Sydney joined us a little while later.

"What's she saying?" I whispered.

Viktoria listened to her sister for a few moments and then leaned closer to me. "She's talking about when Dimitri was very young, how he used to always beg her and her friends to let him play with them. He was about six and they were eight and didn't want him around." Viktoria paused again to take in the next part of the story. "Finally, Karolina told him he could if he agreed to be married off to their dolls. So Karolina and her friends dressed him and the dolls up over and over and kept having weddings. Dimitri was married at least ten times."

I couldn't help but laugh as I tried to picture tough, sexy Dimitri letting his big sister dress him up. He probably would have treated his wedding ceremony with a doll as seriously and stoically as he did his guardian duties.

Other people spoke, and I tried to keep up with the translations. All the stories were about Dimitri's kindness and strength of character. Even when not out battling the undead, Dimitri had always been there to help those who needed it. Almost everyone could recall sometime that Dimitri had stepped up to help others, going out of his way to do what was right, even in situations that could put him at risk. That was no surprise to me. Dimitri always did the right thing.

And it was that attitude that had made me love him so much. I had a similar nature. I too rushed in when others needed me, sometimes when I shouldn't have. Others called me crazy for it, but Dimitri had understood. He'd always understood me, and part of what we'd worked on was how to temper that impulsive need to run into danger with reason and calculation. I had a feeling no one else in this world would ever understand me like he did.

I didn't notice how strongly the tears were running down my cheeks until I saw everyone looking at me. At first, I thought they considered me crazy for crying, but then I realized someone had asked me a question.

"They want you to talk about Dimitri's last days," Viktoria said. "Tell us something. What he did. What he was like."

I used my sleeve to clean my face and looked away, focusing on the bonfire. I'd spoken in front of others before without hesitation, but this was different. "I . . . I can't," I told Viktoria, my voice strained and soft. "I can't talk about him."

She squeezed my hand. "Please. They need to hear about him. They need to know. Just tell us anything. What was he like?"

"He . . . he was your brother. You know."

"Yes," she said gently. "But we want to know what you think he was like."

My eyes were still on the fire, watching the way the flames danced and shifted from orange to blue. "He . . . he was the best man I've ever met." I stopped to gather myself, and Viktoria used the opportunity to translate my words into Russian. "And he was one of the best guardians. I mean, he was young compared to a lot of them, but everyone knew who he was. They all knew his reputation, and lots of people relied on him for advice. They called him a god. And whenever there was a fight . . . or danger . . . he was always

the first one to put himself out there. He never flinched. And a couple months ago, when our school was attacked . . .”

I choked up here a bit. The Belikovs had said they knew of the attack—that *everyone* knew about it—and from the faces here, it was true. I didn’t need to elaborate on that night, on the horrors I’d seen.

“That night,” I continued, “Dimitri rushed out to face the Strigoi. He and I were together when we realized they were attacking. I wanted to stay and help him, but he wouldn’t let me. He just told me to go, to run off and alert others. And he stayed behind—not knowing how many Strigoi he’d have to take on while I went for help. I still don’t know how many he fought—but there were a bunch. And he took them all down alone.”

I dared to look up at the faces around me. Everyone was so quiet and still that I wondered if they were breathing. “It was so hard,” I told them. Without realizing it, my voice had dropped to a whisper. I had to repeat myself more loudly. “It was so hard. I didn’t want to leave him, but I knew I had to. He taught me so much, but one of the biggest things was that we have to protect others. It was my duty to warn everyone else, even though I just wanted to stay with him. The whole time, my heart kept saying, ‘Turn around, turn around. Go to him!’ But I knew what I had to do—and I also knew part of him was trying to keep me safe. And if the roles had been reversed . . . well, I would have made him run too.”

I sighed, surprised I’d revealed so much of my heart. I switched back to business. “Even when the other guardians joined him, Dimitri never backed down. He took down more Strigoi than almost anyone.” Christian and I had actually killed the most. “He . . . he was amazing.”

I told them the rest of the story that I’d told the Belikovs. Only I actually forced a little detail this time, telling them vividly just how brave and fierce he had been. The words hurt me as I spoke, and yet . . . it was almost a relief to get them out. I’d kept the memories of that night too close to me. But eventually, I had to tell them about the cave. And that . . . that was the worst.

“We’d trapped the escaping Strigoi in a cave. It had two entrances, and we came at them from both sides. Some of our people got trapped, though, and there were more Strigoi than we’d expected. We lost people . . . but we would have lost a lot more if Dimitri hadn’t been there. He wouldn’t leave until everyone was out. He didn’t care about the risk to himself. He only knew he had to save others. . . .”

I’d seen it in his eyes, that determination. Our plan had finally been to retreat as soon as we were all out, but I’d had the feeling he would have stayed and killed every Strigoi he could find. But he’d followed orders too, finally beginning his retreat when the others were safe. And in those last moments, just before the Strigoi had bitten him, Dimitri had met my eyes with a look so full of love that it was like that whole cave filled with light. His expression had said what we’d talked about earlier: *We can be together, Rose. Soon. We’re almost there. And nothing will ever keep us apart again. . . .*

I didn’t mention that part, though. When I finished the rest of the tale, the faces of those gathered were grim but filled with awe and respect. Near the back of the crowd, I noticed Abe and his guardians listening as well. His expression was unreadable. Hard, but not angry or scary. Small cups began

circulating through the group, and someone handed me one. A dhampir I didn't know, one of the few men present, stood up and raised his cup in the air. He spoke loudly and reverently, and I heard Dimitri's name mentioned several times. When he finished, he drank from the cup. Everyone else did too, so I followed suit.

And nearly choked to death.

It was like fire in liquid form. It took every ounce of strength I had to swallow it and not spray it on those around me. "Wh . . . what is this?" I asked, coughing.

Viktoria grinned. "Vodka."

I peered at the glass. "No, it isn't. I've had vodka before."

"Not Russian vodka."

Apparently not. I forced the rest of the cup down out of respect to Dimitri, even though I had a feeling that if he were here, he'd be shaking his head at me. I thought I was done being in the spotlight after my story, but apparently not. Everyone kept asking me questions. They wanted to know more about Dimitri, more about what his life had been like recently. They also wanted to know about me and Dimitri as a couple. They all seemed to have figured out that Dimitri and I had been in love—and they were okay with it. I was asked about how we'd met, how long we'd been together . . .

And the whole time, people kept refilling my cup. Determined not to look like an idiot again, I kept drinking until I could finally take the vodka down without coughing or spitting. The more I drank, the louder and more animated my stories became. My limbs started to tingle, and part of me knew this was all probably a bad idea. Okay, all of me knew it.

Finally, people began to clear out. I had no idea what time it was, but I think it was the middle of the night. Maybe later. I stood as well, finding it much harder to do than I'd expected. The world wobbled, and my stomach wasn't very happy with me. Someone caught a hold of my arm and steadied me.

"Easy," said Sydney. "Don't push it." Slowly, carefully, she led me toward the house.

"God," I moaned. "Do they use that stuff as rocket fuel?"

"No one made you keep drinking it."

"Hey, don't get preachy. Besides, I had to be polite."

"Sure," she said.

We made it inside and then had the impossible task of getting up the stairs to the room Olena had given me. Each step was agony.

"They all knew about me and Dimitri," I said, wondering if I'd be saying any of this sober. "But I never told them we were together."

"You didn't have to. It's written all over your face."

"They acted like I was his widow or something."

"You might as well be." We reached my room, and she helped me sit down on the bed. "Not a lot of people get married around here. If you're with someone long enough, they figure it's almost the same."

I sighed and stared off without any particular focus. "I miss him so much."

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Will it ever get better?"

The question seemed to catch her by surprise. “I . . . I don’t know.”

“Have you ever been in love?”

She shook her head. “No.”

I wasn’t sure if that made her lucky or not. I wasn’t sure if all the bright days I’d had with Dimitri were worth the hurt I felt now. A moment later, I knew the truth. “Of course they were.”

“Huh?” asked Sydney.

I realized I’d spoken my thoughts out loud. “Nothing. Just talking to myself. I should get some sleep.”

“Do you need anything else? Are you going to be sick?”

I assessed my queasy stomach. “No, but thanks.”

“Okay.” And in her typically brusque way, she left, turning off the lights and shutting the door.

I would have thought I’d pass out right away. Honestly, I *wanted* to. My heart had been opened up to too much of Dimitri tonight, and I wanted that pain to go away. I wanted blackness and oblivion. Instead, maybe because I was a glutton for punishment, my heart decided to finish the job and rip itself completely open.

I went to visit Lissa.

TEN

EVERYONE HAD HAD IT OFF so well at lunch with Avery that the group had gotten together again that evening and had kind of a wild time. Lissa was thinking about that as she sat in her first-period English class the next morning. They'd stayed up late last night, sneaking out past curfew. The memory brought a smile to Lissa's face, even as she stifled a yawn. I couldn't help but feel a tiny bit of jealousy. I knew Avery was responsible for Lissa's happiness, and that bothered me on a petty level. Yet . . . Avery's new friendship was also making me feel less guilty about leaving Lissa.

Lissa yawned again. It was hard to concentrate on *The Scarlet Letter* while fighting a slight hangover. Avery seemed to have a never-ending supply of liquor. Adrian had taken to this right away, but Lissa had been a little more hesitant. She'd abandoned her partying days a long time ago, but she'd finally succumbed last night and drunk more glasses of wine than she really should have. It wasn't unlike my situation with the vodka, ironically enough. Both of us overindulging, despite being miles and miles apart.

Suddenly, a high-pitched wail pierced the air. Lissa's head shot up, along with everyone else's in the class. In a corner of the room, a small fire alarm flashed and shrieked its warning. Naturally, some students started cheering while some pretended to be scared. The rest just looked surprised and waited.

Lissa's instructor also looked a little caught off guard, and after a quick examination, Lissa decided this wasn't a planned alarm. Teachers usually had a heads-up when there were drills, and Ms. Malloy didn't wear the usual weary expression teachers had when trying to figure out how much time the drill would cut from their lessons.

"Up and at 'em," said Ms. Malloy in annoyance, grabbing a clipboard. "You know where to go." Fire drill procedure was pretty standard.

Lissa followed the others and fell in step with Christian. "Did you set this up?" she teased.

"Nope. Wish I had, though. This class is killing me."

"You? I have the worst headache ever."

He gave her a knowing grin. "Let that be a lesson to you, Little Miss Lush."

She made a face in return and gave him a light punch. They reached their class's meeting spot out on the quad and joined in the semblance of a line the others were trying to form. Ms. Malloy arrived and checked everyone off on her clipboard, satisfied no one had been left behind.

"I don't think this was planned," said Lissa.

"Agreed," said Christian. "Which means even if there's no fire, it might take

a while."

"Well, then. No use waiting around, huh?"

Christian and Lissa turned around in surprise at the voice behind them and saw Avery. She wore a purple sweaterdress and black heels that seemed totally out of place on the wet grass.

"What are you doing here?" asked Lissa. "Figured you'd be in your room."

"Whatever. It's *so* boring there. I had to come liberate you guys."

"You did this?" asked Christian, slightly impressed.

Avery shrugged. "I told you, I was bored. Now, come on while it's still chaotic."

Christian and Lissa exchanged glances. "Well," said Lissa slowly, "I suppose they *did* already take attendance . . ."

"Hurry!" said Avery. Her excitement was contagious, and, feeling bold, Lissa hurried after her, Christian in tow. With all the milling students, no one noticed them cutting across the campus—until they reached the outside of guest housing. Simon stood leaning against the door, and Lissa stiffened. They were busted.

"Everything set?" Avery asked him.

Simon, definitely the strong-and-silent type, gave a swift nod as his only answer before straightening up. He stuffed his hands into his coat pockets and walked off. Lissa stared in amazement.

"He just . . . he just let us go? And is he in on it?" Simon wasn't on campus as a teacher, but still . . . that didn't necessarily mean he'd let students skip out on class because of a faked fire drill.

Avery grinned mischievously, watching him go. "We've been together for a while. He's got better things to do than babysit us."

She led them inside, but instead of going to her room, they cut off to a different section of the building and went somewhere I knew well: Adrian's room.

Avery beat on the door. "Hey, Ivashkov! Open up."

Lissa slapped a hand over her mouth to smother her giggles. "So much for stealth. Everyone's going to hear you."

"I need *him* to hear me," Avery argued.

She kept pounding on the door and yelling, and finally, Adrian answered. His hair stuck up at odd angles, and he had dark circles under his eyes. He'd drunk twice as much as Lissa last night.

"What . . . ?" He blinked. "Shouldn't you guys be in class? Oh God. I didn't sleep that much, did I?"

"Let us in," said Avery, pushing past. "We've got refugees from a fire here."

She flounced onto his couch, making herself at home while he continued staring. Lissa and Christian joined her.

"Avery sprang the fire alarm," explained Lissa.

"Nice work," said Adrian, collapsing into a fluffy chair. "But why'd you have to come *here*? Is this the only place that's not burning down?"

Avery batted her eyelashes at him. "Aren't you happy to see us?"

He eyed her speculatively for a moment. "Always happy to see you."

Lissa was normally pretty straitlaced about this kind of thing, but something about it amused her. It was so wild, so silly . . . it was a break from all her

recent worries. “It’s not going to take them that long to figure it out, you know. They could be letting everyone in right now.”

“They could be,” agreed Avery, putting her feet up on the coffee table. “But I have it on good authority that *another* alarm is going to go off in the school once they open the doors.”

“How the hell did you manage that?” asked Christian.

“Top secret.”

Adrian rubbed his eyes and was clearly amused by this, despite the abrupt wake-up. “You can’t pull fire alarms all day, Lazar.”

“Actually, I have it on good authority that once they give the all-clear on a second alarm, a third’s going to go off.”

Lissa laughed out loud, though a lot of it was due more to the guys’ reactions and less to Avery’s announcement. Christian, in fits of antisocial rebellion, had set people on fire. Adrian spent most of his days drunk and chain-smoking. For a cute society girl like Avery to astonish them, something truly remarkable had to happen. Avery looked very pleased at having outdone them.

“If the interrogation’s over now,” she said, “aren’t you going to offer your guests any refreshments?”

Adrian stood up and yawned. “Fine, fine, you insolent girl. I’ll make coffee.”

“With a kick?” She inclined her head toward Adrian’s liquor cabinet.

“You have got to be kidding,” said Christian. “Do you even have a liver left?”

Avery wandered over to the cabinet and picked up a bottle of something. She held it out to Lissa. “You game?”

Even Lissa’s morning rebelliousness had limits. The wine headache still throbbed in her skull. “Ugh, no.”

“Cowards,” said Avery. She turned back to Adrian. “Well then, Mr. Ivashkov, you’d best put on the pot. I always like a little coffee with my brandy.”

Not long after that, I faded away from Lissa’s head and drifted back into my own, returning to the blackness of sleep and ordinary dreams. It was short-lived, however, seeing as a loud pounding soon jerked me into consciousness.

My eyes flew open, and a deep, searing pain shot through the back of my skull—the aftereffects of that toxic vodka, no doubt. Lissa’s hangover had nothing on mine. I started to close my eyes, wanting to sink back under and let sleep heal the worst of my pain. Then, I heard the pounding again—and worse, my whole bed shook violently. Someone was kicking it.

Opening my eyes again, I turned and found myself staring into Yeva’s shrewd dark eyes. If Sydney had met many dhampirs like Yeva, I could understand why she thought our race were minions of hell. Pursing her lips, Yeva kicked the bed again.

“Hey,” I cried. “I’m awake, okay?”

Yeva muttered something in Russian, and Paul peered around from behind her, translating. “She says you’re not awake until you’re actually out of bed and standing up.”

And with no more warning, that sadistic old woman continued kicking the

bed. I jerked upright, and the world spun around me. I'd said this before, but this time, I really meant it: I was never going to drink again. No good *ever* came from it. The covers looked awfully tempting to my agonized body, but a few more kicks from Yeva's pointy-toed boots made me shoot up off the bed.

"Okay, okay. Are you happy now? I'm up." Yeva's expression didn't change, but at least she stopped with the kicking. I turned to Paul. "What's going on?"

"Grandmother says you have to go with her."

"Where?"

"She says you don't need to know."

I started to say that I wasn't following that crazy old wench anywhere, but after one look at her scary face, I thought better of it. I didn't put it past her to be able to turn people into toads.

"Fine," I said. "I'll be ready to go once I shower and change."

Paul translated my words, but Yeva shook her head and spoke again. "She says there's no time," he explained. "We have to go now."

"Can I at least brush my teeth?"

She allowed that small concession, but a change of clothes was apparently out of the question. It was just as well. Each step I took made me feel woozy, and I probably would have passed out doing something as complicated as dressing and undressing. The clothes didn't smell or anything either; they were mostly just wrinkled from where I'd fallen asleep in them.

When I got downstairs, I saw that no one else was awake except Olena. She was washing leftover dishes from last night and seemed surprised to see me up. That made two of us.

"It's early for you, isn't it?" she asked.

I turned and caught sight of the kitchen clock. I gasped. It was only about four hours after I'd gone to bed. "Good God. Is the sun even up?"

Amazingly, it was. Olena offered to make me breakfast, but again, Yeva reiterated our time crunch. My stomach seemed to simultaneously want and loathe food, so I couldn't say if abstaining was a good thing or not.

"Whatever," I said. "Let's just go and get this over with."

Yeva walked into the living room and returned a few moments later with a large satchel. She handed it to me expectantly. I shrugged and took it, hanging it over one shoulder. It clearly had stuff in it, but it wasn't that heavy. She went back out to the other room and returned with another tote bag. I took this one too and hung it over the same shoulder, balancing both of them. This one was heavier, but my back didn't complain too much.

When she left for a third time and returned with a giant box, I started to get irate. "What is this?" I demanded, taking it from her. It felt like it had bricks in it.

"Grandmother needs you to carry some things," Paul told me.

"Yes," I said through gritted teeth. "I sort of figured that out fifty pounds ago."

Yeva gave me one more box, stacking it on top of the other. It wasn't as heavy, but by this point, it honestly didn't matter. Olena shot me a sympathetic look, shook her head, and returned silently to her dishes, apparently not about to argue with Yeva.

Yeva set off after that, and I followed obediently, trying to both hold the

boxes and not let the bags fall off my shoulder. It was a heavy load, one my hungover body really didn't want, but I was strong enough that I figured it wouldn't be a problem to get into town or wherever she was leading me. Paul ran along at my side, apparently there to let me know if Yeva found anything along the road she wanted me to carry too.

It seemed like spring was charging into Siberia far faster than it ever did into Montana. The sky was clear, and the morning sun was heating things up surprisingly fast. It was hardly summer weather, but it was definitely enough to notice. It would have made very uncomfortable walking weather for a Moroi.

"Do *you* know where we're going?" I asked Paul.

"No," he said cheerfully.

For someone so old, Yeva could move at a pretty good pace, and I found myself having to hurry to keep up with her with my load. At one point, she glanced back and said something that Paul translated as, "She's kind of surprised that you can't move faster."

"Yeah, well, I'm kind of surprised that no one else can carry any of this."

He translated again: "She says if you're really such a famous Strigoi killer, then this shouldn't be a problem."

I was filled with great relief when downtown came into sight . . . only we kept walking past it.

"Oh, come *on*," I said. "Where the hell are we going?"

Without giving me a backward glance, Yeva rattled off something. "Grandmother says Uncle Dimka never would have complained so much," Paul said.

None of this was Paul's fault; he was just the messenger. Yet, every time he spoke, I kind of wanted to kick him. Nonetheless, I kept carrying my burden and didn't say anything else for the rest of the walk. Yeva was right to a certain extent. I was a Strigoi hunter, and it was true that Dimitri would have never complained about some old lady's crazy whims. He would have done his duty patiently.

I tried to summon him up in my mind and draw strength from him. I thought about that time in the cabin again, thought about the way his lips had felt on mine and the wonderful scent of his skin when I'd pressed closer to him. I could hear his voice once more, murmuring in my ear that he loved me, that I was beautiful, that I was the only one . . . Thinking of him didn't take away the discomfort of my journey with Yeva, but it made it a little more bearable.

We walked for almost an hour more before reaching a small house, and I was ready to fall over in relief, soaked in sweat. The house was one floor, made of plain, weatherworn brown boards. The windows, however, were surrounded on three sides by exquisite, highly stylized blue shutters overlaid with a white design. It was that same sort of flashy use of color I'd seen on the buildings in Moscow and Saint Petersburg. Yeva knocked on the door. At first there was only silence, and I panicked, thinking we'd have to turn right around and head back.

Finally, a woman answered the door—a Moroi woman. She was maybe thirty, very pretty, with high cheekbones and strawberry-blond hair. She

exclaimed in surprise at seeing Yeva, smiling and greeting her in Russian. Glancing over at Paul and me, the woman quickly stepped aside and gestured us in.

She switched to English as soon as she realized I was American. All these bilingual people were kind of amazing. It wasn't something I saw very often in the U.S. She pointed to a table and told me to set everything there, which I did with relief.

"My name's Oksana," she said, shaking my hand. "My husband, Mark, is in the garden and should be in soon."

"I'm Rose," I told her.

Oksana offered us chairs. Mine was wooden and straight-backed, but at that moment, it felt like a down-filled bed. I sighed happily and wiped the sweat off my brow. Meanwhile, Oksana unpacked the things I'd carried.

The bags were filled with leftovers from the funeral. The top box contained some dishes and pots, which Paul explained had been borrowed from Oksana some time ago. Oksana finally reached the bottom box, and so help me, it was filled with *garden bricks*.

"You have got to be kidding," I said. Across the living room, Yeva looked very smug.

Oksana was delighted by the gifts. "Oh, Mark will be happy to have these." She smiled at me. "It was very sweet of you to carry these that whole way."

"Happy to help," I said stiffly.

The back door opened, and a man walked in—Mark, presumably. He was tall and stockily built, his graying hair indicating an age greater than Oksana's. He washed his hands in the kitchen sink and then turned to join us. I nearly gasped when I saw his face and discovered something stranger than the age difference. He was a dhampir. For a moment, I wondered if this was someone else and not her husband, Mark. But that was the name Oksana introduced him with, and the truth hit me: a Moroi and dhampir married couple. Sure, our two races hooked up all the time. But marriage? It was very scandalous in the Moroi world.

I tried to keep the surprise off my face and behave as politely as I could. Oksana and Mark seemed very interested in me, though she did most of the talking. Mark simply watched, curiosity all over his face. My hair was down, so my tattoos couldn't have given away my unpromised status. Maybe he was just wondering how an American girl had found her way out to the middle of nowhere. Maybe he thought I was a new blood whore recruit.

By my third glass of water, I began to feel better. It was around that time that Oksana said we should eat, and by then, my stomach was ready for it. Oksana and Mark prepared the food together, dismissing any offers of help.

Watching the couple work was fascinating. I had never seen such an efficient team. They never got in each other's way and never needed to talk about what needed doing next. They just knew. Despite the remote location, the kitchen's contents were modern, and Oksana placed a dish of some sort of potato casserole in the microwave. Mark's back was to her while he rummaged in the refrigerator, but as soon as she hit start, he said, "No, it doesn't need to be that long."

I blinked in surprise, glancing back and forth between them. He hadn't even

seen what time she'd selected. Then I got it. "You're bonded," I exclaimed.

Both looked at me in equal surprise. "Yes. Didn't Yeva tell you?" Oksana asked.

I shot a quick look at Yeva, who was again wearing that annoyingly self-satisfied look on her face. "No. Yeva hasn't been very forthcoming this morning."

"Most everyone around here knows," Oksana said, returning to her work.

"Then . . . then you're a spirit user."

That made her pause again. She and Mark exchanged startled looks. "That," she said, "is *not* something that's widely known."

"Most people think you haven't specialized, right?"

"How did you know?"

Because it was exactly how it had been for Lissa and me. Stories of bonds had always existed in Moroi folklore, but how bonds formed had always been a mystery. It was generally believed they "just happened." Like Oksana, Lissa had generally been regarded as a non-specializing Moroi—one who didn't have any special ability with one element. We realized now, of course, that bonding only occurred with spirit users, when they saved the lives of others.

Something in Oksana's voice told me she wasn't really all that surprised I knew. I couldn't figure out how she'd realized that, however, and I was too stunned by my discovery to say anything else. Lissa and I had never, ever met another bonded pair. The only such two we knew about were the legendary Vladimir and Anna. And those stories were shrouded by centuries of incomplete history, making it difficult to know fact from fiction. The only other leads we had to the world of spirit were Ms. Karp—a former teacher who went insane—and Adrian. Until now, he had been our biggest discovery, a spirit user who was more or less stable—depending on how you looked at it.

When the meal was ready, spirit never came up. Oksana led the conversation, keeping to light topics and jumping between languages. I studied her and Mark as I ate, looking for any signs of instability. I saw none. They seemed like perfectly pleasant, perfectly ordinary people. If I hadn't known what I did, I would have had no reason to suspect anything. Oksana didn't seem depressed or unhinged. Mark hadn't inherited that vile darkness that sometimes seeped into me.

My stomach welcomed the food, and the last of my headache faded away. At one point, though, a strange sensation swept through me. It was disorienting, like a fluttering in my head, and a wave of heat and then ice coursing through me. The feeling disappeared as quickly as it came on, and I hoped it'd be the last of that demon vodka's ill effects.

We finished eating, and I jumped up to help. Oksana shook her head. "No, there's no need. You should go with Mark."

"Huh?" I asked.

He dabbed at his face with a napkin and then stood up. "Yes. Let's go out to the garden."

I started to follow, then paused to glance back at Yeva. I expected her to chastise me for abandoning the dishes. Instead, I found no smug or disapproving looks. Her expression was . . . knowing. Almost expectant. Something about it sent a shiver down my back, and I recalled Viktoria's

words: Yeva had dreamed of my arrival.

The garden Mark led me to was much bigger than I expected, enclosed in a thick fence and lined with trees. New leaves hung on them, blocking the worst of the heat. Lots of bushes and flowers were already in bloom, and here and there, young shoots were well on their way to adulthood. It was beautiful, and I wondered if Oksana had had a hand in it. Lissa was able to make plants grow with spirit. Mark gestured me over to a stone bench. We sat down side by side, and silence fell.

"So," he said. "What would you like to know?"

"Wow. You don't waste time."

"I don't see any point in it. You must have lots of questions. I'll do my best to answer."

"How did you know?" I asked. "That I'm shadow-kissed too. You did, right?"

He nodded. "Yeva told us."

Okay, *that* was a surprise. "Yeva?"

"She can sense things . . . things the rest of us can't. She doesn't always know what she's sensing, however. She only knew there was a strange feel to you, and she'd only ever felt that around one other person. So she brought you to me."

"Seems like she could have done that without me having to carry a household's worth of stuff."

This made him laugh. "Don't take it personally. She was testing you. She wanted to see if you're a worthy match for her grandson."

"What's the point? He's dead now." I nearly choked on the words.

"True, but for her, it's still important. And, by the way, she does think you're worthy."

"She has a funny way of showing it. I mean, aside from bringing me to meet you, I guess."

He laughed again. "Even without her, Oksana would have known what you are as soon as she met you. Being shadow-kissed has an effect on the aura."

"So she can see auras too," I murmured. "What else can she do? She must be able to heal, or you wouldn't be shadow-kissed. Does she have super-compulsion? Can she walk dreams?"

That caught him off guard. "Her compulsion is strong, yes . . . but what do you mean, walk dreams?"

"Like . . . she'd be able to enter someone else's mind when they're asleep. Anyone's mind—not just yours. Then they could have conversations, just as if they were together. My friend can do it."

Mark's expression told me that was news to him. "Your friend? Your bondmate?"

Bondmate? I'd never heard that term. It was weird-sounding, but it made sense. "No . . . another spirit user."

"Another? How many do you know?"

"Three, technically. Well, four now, counting Oksana."

Mark turned away, staring absentmindedly at a cluster of pink flowers. "That many . . . that's incredible. I've only met one other spirit user, and that was years ago. He too was bonded to his guardian. That guardian died, and it

ripped him apart. He still helped us when Oksana and I were trying to figure things out."

I braced myself for my own death all the time, and I feared for Lissa's. Yet it had never occurred to me just what it would be like with a bond. How would it affect the other person? What would it be like to have a gaping hole, where once you'd been intimately linked to someone else?

"He never mentioned walking dreams either," Mark continued. He chuckled again, friendly lines crinkling up around his blue eyes. "I thought I would be helping you, but maybe you're here to help me."

"I don't know," I said doubtfully. "I think you guys have more experience at this than we do."

"Where's your bondmate?"

"Back in the U.S." I didn't have to elaborate, but somehow, I needed to tell him the whole truth. "I . . . I left her."

He frowned. "Left as in . . . you simply traveled? Or left as in you abandoned her?"

Abandoned. The word was like a slap in the face, and suddenly, all I could envision was that last day I'd seen her, when I'd left her crying.

"I had things to do," I said evasively.

"Yes, I know. Oksana told me."

"Told you what?"

Now he hesitated. "She shouldn't have done it. . . . She tries not to."

"Done what?" I exclaimed, uneasy for reasons I couldn't explain.

"She, well . . . she brushed your mind. During brunch."

I thought back and suddenly recalled the tickling in my head, the heat rolling over me. "What does that mean exactly?"

"An aura can tell a spirit user about someone's personality. But Oksana can also dig further, reaching in and actually reading more specific information about a person. Sometimes she can tie that ability into compulsion . . . but the results are very, very powerful. And wrong. It's not right to do that to someone you have no bond with."

It took me a moment to process that. Neither Lissa nor Adrian could read the thoughts of others. The closest Adrian could come to someone's mind was the dream walking. Lissa couldn't do that, not even for me. I could feel her, but the opposite wasn't true.

"Oksana could feel . . . oh, I don't know how to explain it. There's a recklessness in you. You're on some sort of quest. There's vengeance written all over your soul." He suddenly reached over and lifted my hair up, peering at my neck. "Just as I thought. You're unpromised."

I jerked my head back. "Why is that such a big deal? That whole town back there is filled with dhampirs who aren't guardians." I still thought Mark was a nice guy, but being preached to always irritated me.

"Yes, but they've chosen to settle down. You . . . and others like you . . . you become vigilantes of sorts. You're obsessed with hunting Strigoi on your own, with personally setting out to right the wrongs that whole race has brought down upon us. That can only lead to trouble. I see it all the time."

"All the time?" I asked, startled.

"Why do you think guardian numbers are dwindling? They're leaving to

have homes and families. Or they're going off like you, still fighting but answering to no one—unless they're hired to be bodyguards or Strigoi hunters."

"Dhampirs for hire . . ." I suddenly began to understand how a non-royal like Abe had gotten his bodyguards. Money could make anything happen, I supposed. "I've never heard of anything like that."

"Of course not. You think the Moroi and other guardians want that widely known? Want to dangle that in front of you as an option?"

"I don't see what's so wrong with Strigoi hunting. We're always defensive, not offensive, when it comes to Strigoi. Maybe if more dhampirs set out after them, they wouldn't be such a problem."

"Perhaps, but there are different ways of going about that, some better than others. And when you're going out like you are—with a heart filled with sorrow and revenge? That's not one of the better ways. It'll make you sloppy. And the shadow-kissed darkness will just complicate things."

I crossed my arms over my chest and stared stonily ahead. "Yeah, well, it's not like I can do much about that."

He turned to me, expression surprised once more. "Why don't you just have your bondmate heal the darkness out of you?"

ELEVEN

I STARED AT MARK FOR several long seconds. Finally, stupidly, I asked, "Did you say . . . heal?"

Mark stared at me in equal surprise. "Yes, of course. She can heal other things, right? Why not this?"

"Because . . ." I frowned. "That doesn't make any sense. The darkness . . . all the bad side effects . . . those come from Lissa. If she could just heal it, why wouldn't she heal it out of herself?"

"Because when it's in her, it's too ingrained. Too tied into her being. She can't heal it the way she can other things. But once your bond has pulled it into *you*, it's like any other sickness."

My heart was pounding in my chest. What he was suggesting was too ridiculously easy. No, it was just ridiculous, period. There was no way after all that we'd been through that Lissa could heal that rage and depression the way she could a cold or a broken leg. Victor Dashkov, despite his wicked schemes, had known an astonishing amount about spirit and had explained it to us. The other four elements were more physical in nature, but spirit came from the mind and soul. To use that much mental energy—to be able to do such powerful things—couldn't be done without devastating side effects. We'd been fighting those side effects from the beginning, first in Lissa and then in me. They couldn't just go away.

"If that were possible," I said quietly, "then everyone would have done it. Ms. Karp wouldn't have lost her mind. Anna wouldn't have committed suicide. What you're saying is too easy." Mark didn't know who I was talking about, but clearly it didn't matter for what he wanted to express.

"You're right. It's not easy at all. It requires a careful balance, a circle of trust and strength between two people. It took Oksana and me a long time to learn . . . many hard years . . ."

His face darkened, and I could only imagine what those years had been like. My short time with Lissa had been bad enough. They'd had to live with this a lot longer than we had. It had to have been unbearable at times. Slowly, wonderingly, I dared to give credence to his words.

"But now you guys are okay?"

"Hmm." There was a flicker of a wry smile on his lips. "I'd hardly say we're *perfectly* okay. There's only so much she can do, but it makes life manageable. She spaces out the healings as long as we can handle it, since it takes a lot out of her. It's draining, and it limits her overall power."

"What do you mean?"

He shrugged. “She can still do the other things . . . healing, compulsion . . . but not to the levels she would if she wasn’t always healing me.”

My hope faltered. “Oh. Then . . . I couldn’t. I couldn’t do that to Lissa.”

“Compared to what she’s doing to you? Rose. I have a feeling she’d think it was a fair trade.”

I thought back to our last meeting. I thought about how I’d left her there, despite her begging. I thought about the lows she’d been experiencing in my absence. I thought about how she’d refused to heal Dimitri when I’d thought there might still be hope for him. We’d both been bad friends.

I shook my head. “I don’t know,” I said in a small voice. “I don’t know if she would.”

Mark gave me a long, level look, but he didn’t push me on the matter. He glanced up at the sun, almost as if he could tell the time from it. He probably could. He had that surviving-in-the-wilderness kind of feel to him. “The others will wonder what happened to us. Before we go . . .” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, plain silver ring. “Learning to heal will take time. What worries me the most right now is this vigilante mood you’re in. The darkness is only going to make it worse. Take this.”

He extended the ring to me. I hesitated and then reached for it. “What is it?”

“Oksana infused it with spirit. It’s a healing charm.”

Once again, shock ran through me. Moroi charmed objects with elements all the time. Stakes were charmed with all four of the physical elements, making them lethal to Strigoi. Victor had charmed a necklace with earth magic, using the base nature of earth to turn the necklace into a lust charm. Even Sydney’s tattoo was a charm of sorts. I supposed there was no reason that spirit couldn’t charm objects too, but it had never occurred to me, probably because Lissa’s powers were still too new and too foreign.

“What’s it do? I mean, what kind of healing?”

“It’ll help with your moods. It can’t get rid of them, but it’ll lessen them—help you think more clearly. Might keep you out of trouble. Oksana makes these for me to help between healings.” I started to slip it on, but he shook his head. “Save it for when you really feel out of control. The magic won’t last forever. It fades just like any other charm.”

I stared at the ring, my mind suddenly open to all sorts of new possibilities. A few moments later, I slipped it into my coat pocket.

Paul stuck his head out the back door.

“Grandmother wants to leave now,” he told me. “She wants to know why you’re taking so long and said to ask why you’d make someone as old as her keep waiting and suffering with her back.”

I recalled how fast Yeva had been walking while I struggled to keep up with my load. Her back hadn’t seemed all that bad to me, but again, I remembered that Paul was only the messenger and spared him my commentary.

“Okay. I’ll be right there.” When he was gone, I shook my head. “It’s hard being worthy.” I moved toward the door, then gave Mark a backward glance, as a random thought occurred to me. “You’re telling me that going off on your own is bad . . . but you aren’t a guardian either.”

He smiled at me again, one of those sad, wry smiles. “I used to be. Then Oksana saved my life. We bonded and eventually fell in love. I couldn’t stand

to be separated from her after that, and the guardians would have assigned me elsewhere. I had to go."

"Was it hard to leave them?"

"Very. Our age difference made it even more scandalous." A strange chill ran through me. Mark and Oksana were the embodiment of the two halves of my life. They fought against a shadow-kissed bond as Lissa and I did and also faced the same condemnation for their relationship that Dimitri and I had. Mark continued, "But sometimes, we have to listen to our hearts. And even though I left, I'm not out there recklessly going after Strigoi. I'm an old man living with the woman he loves and tending his garden. There's a difference—don't forget that."

My mind was reeling when I returned to the Belikov house. Without the bricks, the walk back had been a lot easier. It had given me a chance to ponder Mark's words. I felt like I'd received a lifetime of information in a one-hour conversation.

Olena was going about the house, doing her normal tasks of cooking and cleaning. While I would personally never want to spend my days doing those sorts of domestic duties, I had to admit there was something comforting about always having someone who was around, ready to cook and worry about me on a daily basis. I knew it was a purely selfish desire, just as I knew my own mom was doing important things with her life. I shouldn't judge her. Still, it made me feel warm and cared for to have Olena treat me like a daughter when she hardly knew me.

"Are you hungry?" she asked automatically. I think one of the greatest fears in her life was that someone might go hungry in her home. Sydney's perpetual lack of appetite had been a nonstop worry for Olena.

I hid a smile. "No, we ate at Mark and Oksana's."

"Ah, that's where you were? They're good people."

"Where is everyone?" I asked. The house was unusually quiet.

"Sonya and Karolina are at work. Viktoria's out at a friend's, but she'll be glad you're back."

"What about Sydney?"

"She left a little while ago. She said she was going back to Saint Petersburg."

"What?" I exclaimed. "Left for good? Just like that?" Sydney had a blunt nature, but this was abrupt even for her.

"The Alchemists . . . well, they're always on the move." Olena handed me a piece of paper. "She left this for you."

I took the note and immediately opened it. Sydney's handwriting was neat and precise. Somehow this didn't surprise me.

Rose,

I'm sorry I had to leave so quickly, but when the Alchemists tell me to jump . . . well, I jump. I've hitched a ride back to that farm town we stayed in so that I can pick up the Red Hurricane, and then I'm off to Saint Petersburg. Apparently, now that you've been delivered to Baia, they don't need me to stick around anymore.

I wish I could tell you more about Abe and what he wants from you. Even if I was allowed to, there isn't much to say. In some ways, he's as much a mystery to me as he is to

you. Like I said, a lot of the business he deals in is illegal—both among humans and Moroi. The only time he gets directly involved with people is when something relates to that business—or if it's a very, very special case. I think you're one of those cases, and even if he doesn't intend you harm, he might want to use you for his own purposes. It could be as simple as him wanting to contract you as a bodyguard, seeing as you're rogue. Maybe he wants to use you to get to others. Maybe this is all part of someone else's plan, someone who's even more mysterious than him. Maybe he's doing someone a favor. Zmey can be dangerous or kind, all depending on what he needs to accomplish.

I never thought I'd care enough to say this to a dhampir, but be careful. I don't know what your plans are now, but I have a feeling trouble follows you around. Call me if there's anything I can help with, but if you go back to the big cities to hunt Strigoi, don't leave any more bodies unattended!

All the best,
Sydney

P.S. "The Red Hurricane" is what I named the car.

P.P.S. Just because I like you, it doesn't mean I still don't think you're an evil creature of the night. You are.

Her cell phone number was added at the bottom, and I couldn't help but smile. Since we'd ridden to Baia with Abe and his guardians, Sydney had had to leave the car behind, which had traumatized her almost as much as the Strigoi. I hoped the Alchemists would let her keep it. I shook my head, amused in spite of her warnings about Abe. The Red Hurricane.

As I headed upstairs to my room, my smile faded. Despite her abrasive attitude, I was going to miss Sydney. She might not exactly be a friend—or was she?—but in this brief time, I'd come to regard her as a constant in my life. I didn't have many of those left anymore. I felt adrift, unsure what to do now. I'd come here to bring peace to Dimitri and had only ended up bringing grief to his family. And if what everyone said was true, I wasn't going to find many Strigoi here in Baia. Somehow, I couldn't picture Dimitri, wandering the road and farms for the occasional prey. Even as a Strigoi—and it killed me to think those words—Dimitri would have a purpose. If he wasn't returning to the familiar sights of his hometown, then he would be doing something else meaningful—inasmuch as a Strigoi could. Sydney's comment in the note had verified what I kept hearing over and over: Strigoi were in the cities. But which one? Where would Dimitri go?

Now *I* was the one without a purpose. On top of it all, I couldn't help but replay Mark's words. Was I really on an insane vigilante mission? Was I foolishly rushing to my death? Or was I foolishly rushing into . . . nothing? Was I doomed to spend the rest of my days wandering? Alone?

Sitting on my bed, I felt my mood plummet and knew I had to distract myself. I was too susceptible to dark emotions as long as Lissa used spirit; I didn't need to further encourage them. I slipped on the ring that Mark had given me, hoping it would bring some sort of clarity and tranquility. I felt no noticeable difference, though, and decided to seek peace from that same place I always did: Lissa's mind.

She was with Adrian, and the two were practicing spirit again. After some initial bumps in the road, Adrian was proving a quick study at healing. That had been the first of Lissa's powers to manifest, and it always irked her that he made more progress on what she had to teach him than vice versa.

"I'm running out of things for you to heal," she said, setting some tiny potted plants onto a table. "Unless we start cutting off limbs or something."

Adrian smiled. "I used to tease Rose about that, how I was going to impress her by healing amputees or something equally absurd."

"Oh, and I'm sure she had a smartass response for you each time."

"Yes, yes, she did." His face was fond as he recalled the memory. There was a part of me that was always insanely curious to hear them talk about me . . . yet at the same time, I always felt bad at the grief my name seemed to invoke.

Lissa groaned and stretched out on the carpeted floor. They were in a dorm lounge, and curfew was swiftly approaching. "I want to talk to her, Adrian."

"You can't," he said. There was an unusual seriousness in his voice. "I know she still checks in on you—that's the closest you'll get to talking to her. And honestly? That's not so bad. You can tell her exactly how you feel."

"Yeah, but I want to hear her talk back like you do in your dreams."

This made him smile again. "She does plenty of talking back, believe me."

Lissa sat up straight. "Do it now."

"Do what now?"

"Go visit her dreams. You always try to explain it to me, but I've never actually seen it. Let me watch."

He stared, at a loss for words. "That's kind of voyeuristic."

"Adrian! I want to learn this, and we've tried everything else. I can feel the magic around you sometimes. Just do it, okay?"

He started to protest again but then bit off his comment after studying her face for a moment. Her words had been sharp and demanding—very uncharacteristic for her. "Okay. I'll try."

The whole idea of Adrian trying to get into my head while I was watching him through Lissa's head was surreal, to say the least. I didn't quite know what to expect from him. I'd always wondered if he had to be asleep or at least have his eyes closed. Apparently not. He instead stared off at nothing, his eyes going vacant as his mind left the world around him. Through Lissa's eyes, I could see some of the magic radiating off him and his aura, and she tried to analyze each strand. Then, without warning, all the magic faded. He blinked and shook his head.

"Sorry. I can't do it."

"Why not?"

"Proobably because she's awake. Did you learn anything by watching?"

"A little. Probably would've been more useful if you'd actually made the connection." Again, Lissa had that petulant tone.

"She could be anywhere in the world, you know, on any schedule." His words were smothered by a yawn. "Maybe we can try at different times of the day. I've been getting her . . . actually, close to this time. Or sometimes I catch her really early in the day."

"She could be close by then," said Lissa.

"Or on a human daylight schedule in some other part of the world."

Her enthusiasm dropped. "Right. That too."

"How come you guys never look like you're working?"

Christian strolled into the room, looking amused at Lissa sitting on the floor and Adrian sprawling on the couch. Standing behind Christian was someone I

hadn't thought I'd see anytime soon. Adrian, who could detect women a mile away, also immediately noticed the newcomer.

"Where'd you get the jailbait?" he asked.

Christian shot Adrian a warning look. "This is Jill." Jill Mastrano allowed herself to be nudged forward, her light green eyes impossibly wide as she looked around. "Jill, this is Lissa and Adrian."

Jill was one of the last people I'd expected to see here. I'd met her a little over a month ago. She was in ninth grade, which meant she'd be here on the upper campus in the fall. She had the same super-slim build that most Moroi had, but it was paired with height that was impressive even by vampiric standards. It made her look rail-thin. Her hair fell in light brown curls to the middle of her back and would be beautiful—when she learned how to style it properly. For now, it was kind of messy, and her overall impression—while cute—was kind of awkward.

"H-hi," she said, looking from face to face. As far as she was concerned, these were Moroi gold star celebrities. She'd nearly passed out when she first met me and Dimitri, thanks to our reputations. From her expression, she was in a similar state now.

"Jill wants to learn how to use her power for good instead of evil," said Christian with an exaggerated wink. That was his coy way of saying Jill wanted to learn how to fight with her magic. She'd expressed the interest to me, and I'd told her to find Christian. I was glad she'd had the courage to take me up on my advice. Christian was a campus celebrity too, albeit an infamous one.

"Another recruit?" asked Lissa, shaking her head. "Think you'll keep this one around?"

Jill gave Christian a startled look. "What's that mean?"

"After the attack, lots of people said they wanted to learn to fight with magic," Christian explained. "So they found me, and we worked together . . . once or twice. Then everyone faded away once it got hard, and they realized they had to keep practicing."

"It doesn't help that you're a mean teacher," pointed out Lissa.

"And so now you've got to recruit among children," said Adrian solemnly.

"Hey," said Jill indignantly. "I'm fourteen." Immediately, she flushed at having spoken so boldly to him. He found it amusing, as he did so many other things.

"My mistake," he said. "What's your element?"

"Water."

"Fire and water, huh?" Adrian reached into his pocket and pulled out a one-hundred-dollar bill. He snapped it out straight. "Sweetheart, I'll make you a deal. If you can make a bucket of water appear and dump over Christian's head, I'll give you this."

"I'll add in ten," laughed Lissa.

Jill looked stunned, but I suspected it was because Adrian had called her "sweetheart." I took Adrian for granted so often that it was easy to forget he really was a hot guy. Christian pushed Jill toward the door.

"Ignore them. They're just jealous because spirit users can't go charging into battle like we can." He knelt down to Lissa's height on the floor and gave her

a quick kiss. “We were practicing in the lounge upstairs, but I’ve got to walk her back now. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“You don’t have to,” said Jill. “I can get back there fine. I don’t want to be any trouble.”

Adrian stood up. “You aren’t. If anyone’s going to step up and be the knight in shining armor here, it might as well be me. I’ll take you back and leave the lovebirds to their lovebirding.” He gave Jill a grand bow. “Shall we?”

“Adrian—” said Lissa, a sharp note in her voice.

“Oh, come on,” he said, rolling his eyes. “I’ve got to head back anyway—you guys are of no use once curfew comes. And honestly, give me some credit here. Even I have boundaries.”

He gave Lissa a meaningful look, one that told her she was an idiot for thinking he was going to hit on Jill. Lissa held his gaze for a few moments and realized he was right. Adrian was a scoundrel at times and had never made his interest in me a secret, but walking Jill home wasn’t part of some grand seduction. He really was just being nice.

“All right,” said Lissa. “I’ll see you later. Nice meeting you, Jill.”

“You too,” said Jill. She dared a smile at Christian. “Thanks again.”

“You better show up for our next practice,” he warned.

Adrian and Jill started to step out the door, just as Avery stepped through it.

“Hey, Adrian.” Avery gave Jill a once-over. “Who’s your jailbait?”

“Will you guys stop calling me that?” exclaimed Jill.

Adrian pointed at Avery chastisingly. “Hush. I’ll deal with you later, Lazar.”

“I certainly hope so,” she said in a singsong voice. “I’ll leave the door unlocked.”

Jill and Adrian left, and Avery sat down next to Lissa. She seemed animated enough to be drunk, but Lissa smelled no liquor on her. Lissa was rapidly learning that some part of Avery was always just vivacious and carefree, regardless of intoxication.

“Did you really just invite Adrian to your room later?” asked Lissa. She spoke teasingly but had been secretly wondering if something was going on between them. And yeah, that made two of us who wondered.

Avery shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe. Sometimes we hang out once you guys are all tucked into bed. You aren’t going to get jealous, are you?”

“No,” laughed Lissa. “Just curious. Adrian’s a good guy.”

“Oh?” asked Christian. “Define ‘good.’”

Avery held up her hand and began ticking items off with each finger. “He’s devastatingly handsome, funny, rich, related to the queen . . .”

“You got your wedding colors picked out?” asked Lissa, still laughing.

“Not yet,” said Avery. “I’m still testing the waters. I figured he’d be an easy notch on the Avery Lazar belt, but he’s kind of hard to read.”

“I really don’t want to be hearing this,” Christian said.

“Sometimes he acts like a love ’em and leave ’em type. Other times, he mopes like some heartbroken romantic.” Lissa exchanged a knowing glance with Christian that Avery didn’t catch while talking. “Anyway, I’m not here to talk about him. I’m here to talk about you and me busting out of here.” Avery threw her arm around Lissa, who nearly fell over.

“Out of where? The dorm?”

"No. This school. We're going off on a wild weekend to the Royal Court."

"What, this weekend?" Lissa felt like she was three steps behind, and I didn't blame her. "Why?"

"Because it's Easter. And her royal majesty thought it would be 'lovely' if you could join her for the holiday." Avery's tone was grand and high-pitched. "And, since I've been hanging out with you, Dad's decided I'm on good behavior now."

"Poor oblivious bastard," murmured Christian.

"So he said I can go with you." Avery glanced at Christian. "You can too, I guess. The queen said Lissa could bring a guest—in addition to me, of course."

Lissa looked into Avery's radiant face and didn't share her enthusiasm. "I *hate* going to Court. Tatiana just goes on and on, giving what she thinks is useful advice for me. It's always boring and miserable now." Lissa didn't add that she'd once found Court fun—when I'd gone with her.

"That's because you haven't gone with me yet. It'll be a blast! I know where all the good stuff is. And I bet Adrian'll come too. He can push his way into anything. It'll be like a double date."

Slowly, Lissa began to acknowledge that this might be fun. She and I had managed to find a little of the "good stuff" that hid underneath the polished surface of Court life. Every other visit since had been just as she described—stuffy and businesslike. But now, going with Christian and wild, spontaneous Avery? That had potential.

Until Christian ruined it. "Well, don't count me in," he said. "If you can only bring one person, bring Jill."

"Who?" asked Avery.

"Jailbait," explained Lissa. She looked at Christian in astonishment. "Why on earth would I bring Jill? I just met her."

"Because she's actually serious about learning to defend herself. You should introduce her to Mia. They're both water users."

"Right," said Lissa knowingly. "And the fact that you hate it at Court has nothing to do with it?"

"Well . . ."

"Christian!" Lissa was suddenly getting upset. "Why can't you do this for me?"

"Because I hate the way Queen Bitch looks at me," he said.

Lissa didn't find this convincing. "Yeah, but when we graduate, I'll be living there. You'll have to go then."

"Yeah, well, then give me this small vacation first."

Lissa's irritation grew. "Oh, I see how it is. I have to put up with your crap all the time, but you can't go out of your way for me."

Avery glanced between them and then stood up. "I'll leave you kids to work this out on your own. I don't care whether Christian or Jailbait goes, as long as *you're* there." She peered down at Lissa. "You are going, right?"

"Yeah. I'll go." If anything, Christian's refusal had suddenly spurred Lissa more.

Avery grinned. "Awesome. I'm going to head out of here, but you two had better kiss and make up when I'm gone."

Avery's brother Reed suddenly appeared in the doorway. "Are you ready?"

he asked her. Every time he spoke, it always came out as sort of a grunt. Avery flashed the others a triumphant look.

"See? My gallant brother, coming to walk me back before those dorm matrons start yelling at me to leave. Now Adrian'll have to find a new and exciting way to prove his chivalry."

Reed didn't look very gallant or chivalrous, but I supposed it was nice of him to come walk her back to her room. His timing had been eerily perfect. Maybe she was right about him not being as bad as people always thought.

As soon as Avery was gone, Lissa turned on Christian. "Are you really serious about me bringing Jill instead of you?"

"Yep," said Christian. He tried to lie back into her lap, but she pushed him away. "But I'll count the seconds until you return."

"I can't believe you think this is a joke."

"I don't," he said. "Look, I didn't mean to get you all worked up, okay? But really . . . I just don't want to deal with all that Court drama. And it would be good for Jill." He frowned. "You don't have anything against her, do you?"

"I don't even know her," said Lissa. She was still upset—more so than I would have expected, which was odd.

Christian caught hold of Lissa's hands, face serious. Those blue eyes she loved softened her anger a little. "Please, I'm not trying to upset you. If it's really that important . . ."

Like that, Lissa's anger diffused. It was abrupt, like a switch. "No, no. I'm fine bringing Jill—though I'm not sure she should be hanging out with us and doing whatever Avery has in mind."

"Give Jill to Mia. She'll look after her for the weekend."

Lissa nodded, wondering why he was so interested in Jill. "Okay. But you're not doing this because you don't like Avery, are you?"

"No, I like Avery. She makes you smile more."

"You make me smile."

"That's why I added on the 'more.'" Christian gently kissed Lissa's hand. "You've been so sad since Rose left. I'm glad you're hanging out with someone else—I mean, not that you can't get everything you need from me."

"Avery's not a Rose replacement," said Lissa quickly.

"I know. But she reminds me of her."

"What? They have nothing in common."

Christian straightened up and sat beside her, resting his face against her shoulder. "Avery's like how Rose used to be, back before you guys left."

Both Lissa and I paused to ponder that. Was he right? Before Lissa's spirit powers had begun showing, she and I had lived a party girl lifestyle. And yes, half the time I was the one coming up with the crazy ideas to find a good time and get us into trouble. But had I been as out there as Avery seemed sometimes?

"There'll never be another Rose," said Lissa sadly.

"No," agreed Christian. He gave her a brief, soft kiss on the mouth. "But there will be other friends."

I knew he was right, but I couldn't help but feel a small stab of jealousy. I also couldn't help feel a small amount of worry. Lissa's brief spurt of irritation had been kind of out of the blue. I could understand her wishing Christian

could go, but her attitude had been a little bitchy—and her almost jealous worry over Jill was weird too. Lissa had no reason to doubt Christian's feelings, certainly not over someone like Jill. Lissa's moodiness reminded me too much of the old days.

Most likely she was overtired, but some instinct—maybe it was part of the bonding—told me something was wrong. It was a fleeting sensation, one I couldn't quite get a hold of, like water slipping through my fingers. Still, my instincts had been right before, and I decided I'd be checking in on Lissa more frequently.

TWELVE

BEING WITH LISSA LEFT ME with more questions than answers, and so without a course of action, I simply continued to stay with the Belikovs for the next few days. I fell into their normal routine, again surprised by how easy it was. I tried hard to make myself useful, doing any chores they'd let me do and even going so far as watching the baby (something I wasn't entirely comfortable with, seeing as guardian training hadn't left much time for after school jobs like babysitting). Yeva eyed me the whole time, never saying anything but always looking like she disapproved. I wasn't sure if she wanted me to go or if that was simply the way she always looked. The others, however, didn't question me at all. They were delighted to have me around and made it obvious in every action. Viktoria was especially happy.

"I wish you could come back to school with us," Viktoria said wistfully one evening. She and I had been spending a lot of time together.

"When do you go back?"

"Monday, right after Easter."

I felt a little sadness stir in me. Whether I was still here or not, I would miss her. "Oh, man. I didn't realize it was so soon."

A small silence fell between us; then she gave me a sidelong look. "Have you thought . . . well, have you maybe thought about coming back to St. Basil's with us?"

I stared. "St. Basil's? Your school is named after a saint too?" Not all of them were. Adrian had attended an East Coast school called Alder.

"Ours is a human saint," she said with a grin. "You could enroll there. You could finish your last year—I'm sure they'd take you."

Of all the crazy options I'd considered on this trip—and believe me, I'd considered a lot of crazy things—that was one that had never crossed my mind. I'd written school off. I was pretty sure there was nothing else I could learn—well, after meeting Sydney and Mark, it had become obvious there were still a *few* more things. Considering what I wanted to do with my life, however, I didn't think another semester of math and science would do much for me. And as far as guardian training went, mostly all I had left to do was prepare for the end-of-year trials. I somehow doubted those tests and challenges would even come remotely close to what I'd experienced with Strigoi already.

I shook my head. "I don't think so. I think I'm pretty much done with school. Besides, it'd all be in Russian."

"They'd translate for you." A mischievous grin lit her face. "Besides, kicking

and punching transcend language." Her smile faded to a more thoughtful expression. "But seriously. If you aren't going to finish school, and you aren't going to be a guardian . . . well, why don't you stay here? I mean, just in Baia. You could live with us."

"I'm not going to be a blood whore," I said immediately.

An odd look crossed her face. "That's not what I meant."

"I shouldn't have said that. Sorry." I felt bad about the comment. While I kept hearing rumors about blood whores in town, I'd only seen one or two, and certainly the Belikov women weren't among them. Sonya's pregnancy was something of a mystery, but working in a drugstore didn't seem that sordid. I'd learned a little bit more about Karolina's situation. The father of her children was a Moroi she apparently had a genuine connection with. She hadn't cheapened herself to be with him, and he hadn't used her. After the baby was born, the two of them had decided to part ways, but it had been friendly. Karolina was now apparently dating a guardian who visited whenever he had leave.

The few blood whores I had seen around town very much fit my stereotype. Their clothing and makeup screamed easy sex. The bruises on their necks clearly showed that they had no problem with letting their partners drink blood during sex, which was pretty much the sleaziest thing a dhampir could do. Only humans gave blood to Moroi. My race didn't. To allow it—particularly during sexual activities—well, like I said, it was sleazy. The dirtiest of the dirty.

"Mother would love it if you stayed. You could get a job too. Just be part of our family."

"I can't take Dimitri's place, Viktoria," I said softly.

She reached out and gave my hand a reassuring squeeze. "I know. No one expects you to. We like you for you, Rose. You being here just feels right—there's a reason Dimka chose to be with you. You fit in here."

I tried to imagine the life she described. It sounded . . . easy. Comfortable. No worries. Just living with a loving family, laughing and hanging out together each night. I could go about my own life, not having to trail someone else all day. I would have sisters. There'd be no fighting—unless it was to defend. I could give up this plan to kill Dimitri—which I knew would kill me too, either physically or spiritually. I could choose the rational path, let him go and accept him as dead. And, yet . . . if I did that, why not just go back to Montana? Back to Lissa and the Academy?

"I don't know," I told Viktoria at last. "I don't know what I'm going to do."

It was just after dinner, and she glanced hesitantly at the clock. "I don't want to leave you since we don't have much time together, but . . . I was supposed to meet someone soon . . . ."

"Nikolai?" I teased.

She shook her head, and I tried to hide my disappointment. I'd seen him a few times, and he'd grown more and more likeable. It was too bad Viktoria couldn't kindle any feelings for him. Now, though, I wondered if there might be something holding her back—or rather, someone.

"Oh, spill," I said with a grin. "Who is he?"

She kept her face blank in a fair imitation of Dimitri's. "A friend," she said

evasively. But I thought I saw a smile in her eyes.

"Someone at school?"

"No." She sighed. "And that's the problem. I'm going to miss him so much."

My smile faded. "I can imagine."

"Oh." She looked embarrassed. "That's stupid of me. My problems . . . well, they're nothing compared to yours. I mean, I may not see him for a while . . . but I *will* see him. But Dimitri's gone. You won't see him ever again."

Well, that might not be *entirely* true. I didn't tell her that, though. Instead, I just said, "Yeah."

To my surprise, she gave me a hug. "I know what love's like. To lose that . . . I don't know. I don't know what to say. All I can tell you is that we're here for you. All of us, okay? You can't replace Dimitri, but you do feel like a sister."

Her calling me a sister both stunned and warmed me at the same time. She had to go get ready for her date after that. She hurriedly changed clothes and put on makeup—definitely more than a friend, I decided—and headed out the door. I was kind of glad because I didn't want her to see the tears that her words had brought to my eyes. I'd spent my life as an only child. Lissa had been the closest I had to a sister. I'd always thought of Lissa as one; one I'd now lost. To hear Viktoria call me a sister now . . . well, it stirred something in me. Something that told me I really did have friends and wasn't alone.

I headed down to the kitchen after that, and Olena soon joined me. I was rummaging for food.

"Was that Viktoria I heard leave?" she asked.

"Yeah, she went off to see a friend." To my credit, I kept my expression neutral. No way would I sell Viktoria out.

Olena sighed. "I'd wanted her to run an errand for me in town."

"I'll do it," I said eagerly. "After I grab something to eat."

She gave me a kind smile and patted my cheek. "You have a good heart, Rose. I can see why Dimka loved you."

It was so amazing, I thought, how accepted my relationship with Dimitri was around here. No one brought up age or teacher-student relationships. As I'd told Sydney, it was like I was his widow or something, and Viktoria's words about me staying replayed in my head. The way Olena looked at me made me feel like I really was her daughter, and once more, I experienced those traitorous feelings about my own mom. She probably would have scoffed at me and Dimitri. She would have called it inappropriate and said I was too young. Or would she have? Maybe I was being too harsh.

Seeing me in front of the open cupboard, Olena shook her head reproachfully. "But you need to eat first."

"Just a snack," I assured her. "Don't go to any trouble."

She ended up slicing me off big pieces of black bread she'd baked earlier that day and put out a tub of butter because she knew I loved to slather up my slices. Karolina had teased me that Americans might be shocked to know what was in this bread, so I never asked any questions. It was somehow sweet and tangy at the same time, and I loved it.

Olena sat down across from me and watched me eat. "This was his favorite when he was little."

"Dimitri's?"

She nodded. "Whenever he was on break from school, the first thing he'd do is ask for that bread. I practically had to make him his own loaf each time with the way he ate. The girls never ate that much."

"Guys always seem to eat more." Admittedly, I could keep up with most of them. "And he's bigger and taller than most."

"True," she mused. "But I eventually reached a point where I made him start making it himself. I told him if he was going to eat all my food, he'd best know how much work went into it."

I laughed. "I can't imagine Dimitri baking bread."

And yet, as soon as the words came out, I reconsidered. My immediate associations with Dimitri were always intense and fierce; it was his sexy, battle-god persona that came to mind. Yet, it had been Dimitri's gentleness and thoughtfulness mixed with that deadliness that made him so wonderful. The same hands that wielded stakes with such precision would carefully brush the hair out of my face. The eyes that could astutely spot any danger in the area would regard me wonderingly and worshipfully, like I was the most beautiful and amazing woman in the world.

I sighed, consumed by that bittersweet ache in my chest that had become so familiar now. What a stupid thing, getting worked up over a loaf of bread of all things. But that was how it was. I got emotional whenever I thought about Dimitri.

Olena's eyes were on me, sweet and compassionate. "I know," she said, guessing my thoughts. "I know exactly how you feel."

"Does it get easier?" I asked.

Unlike Sydney, Olena had an answer. "Yes. But you'll never be the same."

I didn't know whether to take comfort from those words or not. After I finished eating, she gave me a brief grocery list, and I set off toward downtown, happy to be outside and moving. Inactivity didn't suit me.

While in the grocery store, I was surprised to run into Mark. I'd gotten the impression he and Oksana didn't come to town that often. I wouldn't have put it past them to grow their own food and live off the land. He gave me a warm smile. "I wondered if you were still around."

"Yeah." I held up my basket. "Just doing some shopping for Olena."

"I'm glad you're still here," he said. "You seem more . . . at peace."

"Your ring is helping, I think. At least with the peace. It hasn't done much as far as any decision making goes."

He frowned, shifting the milk he held in one arm to the other. "What decisions?"

"What to do now. Where to go."

"Why not stay here?"

It was eerie, so similar to the conversation I'd had with Viktoria. And my response was equally similar. "I don't know what I'd do if I stayed here."

"Get a job. Live with the Belikovs. They love you, you know. You fit right in with their family."

That warm, loved feeling came back, and I again tried to imagine myself just settling down with them, working in a store like this or waiting tables. "I don't know," I said. I was a broken record. "I just don't know if that's right for

me."

"Better than the alternative," he warned. "Better than running off with no real purpose, throwing yourself in the face of danger. That's no choice at all."

And yet, it was the reason I'd come to Siberia in the first place. My inner voice scolded me. *Dimitri, Rose. Have you forgotten Dimitri? Have you forgotten how you came here to free him, like he would have wanted?* Or was that really what he would have wanted? Maybe he would have wanted me to stay safe. I just didn't know, and with no more help from Mason, my choices were even more muddled. Thinking of Mason suddenly reminded me of something I'd totally forgotten.

"When we talked before . . . well, we talked about what Lissa and Oksana could do. But what about *you*?"

Mark narrowed his eyes. "What do you mean?"

"Have you ever . . . have you ever run into, um, ghosts?"

Several moments passed, and then he exhaled. "I'd hoped that wouldn't happen to you."

It astonished me then how much relief I felt to know I wasn't alone in my ghostly experiences. Even though I now understood that having died and been to the world of the dead made me a target for spirits, it was still one of the freakiest things about being shadow-kissed.

"Did it happen without you wanting it?" I asked.

"At first. Then I learned to control it."

"Me too." I suddenly recalled the barn. "Actually, that's not entirely true."

Lowering my voice further, I hastily recapped what had happened on my trip here with Sydney. I'd never spoken of it to anyone.

"You must never, ever do that again," he said sternly.

"But I didn't mean to! It just happened."

"You panicked. You needed help, and some part of you called out to the spirits around you. Don't do it. It's not right, and it's easy to lose control."

"I don't even know how I did it."

"Like I said, lapse of control. Don't ever let your panic get the best of you."

An older woman passed us, a scarf over her head and a basket of vegetables in her arms. I waited until she was gone before asking Mark, "Why did they fight for me?"

"Because the dead hate Strigoi. The Strigoi are unnatural, neither living nor dead—just existing in some state in between. Just as we sense that evil, so do the ghosts."

"Seems like they could be a good weapon."

That face, normally easy and open, frowned. "It's dangerous. People like you and me already walk the edge of darkness and insanity. Openly calling upon the dead only brings us closer to falling over that edge and losing our minds." He glanced at his watch and sighed. "Look, I have to go, but I'm serious, Rose. Stay here. Stay out of trouble. Fight Strigoi if they come to you, but don't go seeking them blindly. And definitely leave the ghosts alone."

It was a lot of advice to get in a grocery store, a lot of advice I wasn't sure I could follow. But I thanked him and sent my regards to Oksana before paying and leaving as well. I was heading back toward Olena's neighborhood when I rounded a corner and nearly walked right into Abe.

He was dressed in his usual flashy way, wearing that expensive coat and a yellow-gold scarf that matched the gold in his jewelry. His guardians hovered nearby, and he leaned casually against a building's brick wall.

"So this is why you came to Russia. To go to the market like some peasant."

"No," I said. "Of course not."

"Just sightseeing then?"

"No. I'm just being helpful. Stop trying to get information out of me. You're not as smart as you think you are."

"That's not true," he said.

"Look, I told you already. I came here to tell the Belikovs the news. So go back and tell whoever you're working for that that's that."

"And *I* told you before not to lie to me," he said. Again, I saw that odd mix of danger and humor. "You have no idea how patient I've been with you. From anyone else, I would have gotten the information I needed that first night."

"Lucky me," I snapped back. "What now? Are you going to take me down an alley and beat me up until I tell you why I'm here? I'm losing interest in this whole scary-mob-boss routine, you know."

"And I'm losing patience with you," he said. There went the humor, and as he stood over me, I couldn't help but uneasily note that he was better built than most Moroi. A lot of Moroi avoided fights, but I wouldn't have been surprised if Abe had roughed up as many people as his bodyguards had. "And honestly? I don't care why you're here anymore. You just need to leave. Now."

"Don't threaten me, old man. I'll leave whenever the hell I want." It was funny, I'd just sworn to Mark that I didn't know if I could stay in Baia, but when pressured by Abe, I just wanted to dig my feet in. "I don't know what you're trying to keep me from, but I'm not scared of you." That also wasn't entirely true.

"You should be," he returned pleasantly. "I can be a very good friend or a very bad enemy. I can make it worth your while if you leave. We can strike a bargain."

There was an almost excited gleam in his eyes as he spoke. I recalled Sydney describing him manipulating others, and I got the feeling this was what he lived for—negotiating, striking trades to get what he wanted.

"No," I said. "I'll leave when I'm ready. And there's nothing you or whoever you're working for can do about it."

Hoping I appeared bold, I turned around. He reached out and grabbed my shoulder, jerking me back, nearly causing me to lose the groceries. I started to lunge forward in attack mode, but his guardians were right there in a flash. I knew I wouldn't get far.

"Your time is up here," hissed Abe. "In Baia. In Russia. Go back to the U.S. I'll give you what you need—money, first-class tickets, whatever."

I stepped out of his reach, backing carefully away. "I don't need your help or your money—God only knows where it comes from." A group of people turned the corner across the street, laughing and talking, and I stepped back further, certain Abe wouldn't start a scene with witnesses present. It made me feel braver, which was probably stupid on my part. "And I already told you: I'll go back whenever the hell I want."

Abe's eyes lifted to the other pedestrians, and he too retreated back with his guardians. That chilling smile was on his face. "And I told you. I can be a very good friend or a very bad enemy. Get out of Baia before you find out which."

He turned around and left, much to my relief. I didn't want him to see just how much fear his words had left on my face.

I went to bed early that night, suddenly feeling antisocial. I lay there for a while, flipping through another magazine I couldn't read, and amazingly found myself growing more and more tired. I think the encounters with Mark and Abe had exhausted me. Mark's words about staying had hit too close to home after my earlier conversation with Viktoria. Abe's thinly veiled threats had raised all my defenses, putting me on guard against whoever was working with him to make me leave Russia. At what point, I wondered, would he truly lose patience and stop trying to bargain?

I drifted off to sleep and the familiar sense of an Adrian-dream settled around me. It had been a long time since this had happened, and I'd actually thought he'd listened to me when I'd told him to stay away before. Of course, I always told him that. This had been the longest time span to go by without a visit, and as much as I hated to admit it, I'd kind of missed him.

The setting he'd chosen this time was a piece of the Academy's property, a woodsy area near a pond. Everything was green and in bloom, and sunlight shone down on us. I suspected Adrian's creation didn't match what Montana's weather was really like right now, but then, he was in control. He could do whatever he wanted.

"Little dhampir," he said, smiling. "Long time no see."

"I thought you were done with me," I said, sitting down on a large, smooth rock.

"Never done with you," he said, stuffing his hands in his pockets and strolling over to me. "Although . . . to tell the truth, I *did* intend to stay away this time. But, well, I had to make sure you were still alive."

"Alive and well."

He smiled down at me. The sun glinted off his brown hair, giving it golden-chestnut highlights. "Good. You seem very well, actually. Your aura's better than I've ever seen it." His eyes drifted from my face down to where my hands lay in my lap. Frowning, he knelt down and picked up my right hand. "What's this?"

Oksana's ring was on it. Despite the ring's lack of ornamentation, the metal gleamed brightly in the light. The dreams were so strange. Even though Adrian and I weren't together, exactly, the ring had followed me in and kept its power enough that he could sense it.

"A charm. It's infused with spirit."

Like me, this was apparently something he'd never considered. His expression grew eager. "And it heals, right? It's what's keeping some of the darkness from your aura."

"Some," I said, uneasy about his fixation on it. I took it off and slipped it into my pocket. "It's temporary. I met another spirit user—and a shadow-kissed dhampir."

More surprise registered on his face. "What? Where?"

I bit my lip and shook my head.

"Damn it, Rose! This is big. You know how Lissa and I have been looking for other spirit users. Tell me where they are."

"No. Maybe later. I don't want you guys coming after me." For all I knew, they were already after me, using Abe as their agent.

His green eyes flashed angrily. "Look, pretend for a moment the world doesn't revolve around you, okay? This is about Lissa and me, about understanding this crazy magic inside of us. If you've got people who can help us, we need to know."

"Maybe later," I repeated stonily. "I'm moving on soon—then I'll tell you."

"Why are you always so difficult?"

"Because you like me that way."

"At the moment? Not so much."

It was the kind of joking comment Adrian usually made, but just then, something about it bothered me. For some reason, I got the tiniest, *tiniest* feeling that I suddenly wasn't as endearing to him as usual.

"Just try being patient," I told him. "I'm sure you guys have other stuff to work on. And Lissa seems pretty busy with Avery." The words slipped out before I could help it, and some of the bitterness and envy I'd felt watching them the other night laced my tone.

Adrian raised an eyebrow. "Ladies and gentlemen, she admits it. You have been spying on Lissa—I knew it."

I looked away. "I just like to know she's alive too." As if I could go anywhere in the world and not know that.

"She is. Alive and well, like you. Er . . . mostly well." Adrian frowned. "Sometimes I get this strange vibe off of her. She doesn't seem quite right or her aura will flicker a little. Never lasts long, but I still worry." Something in Adrian's voice softened. "Avery worries about her too, so Lissa's in good hands. Avery's pretty amazing."

I gave him a scathing look. "*Amazing*? Do you like her or something?" I hadn't forgotten Avery's comment about leaving the door unlocked for him.

"Of course I like her. She's a great person."

"No, I mean *like*. Not like."

"Oh, I see," he said, rolling his eyes. "We're dealing with elementary school definitions of 'like.'"

"You're not answering the question."

"Well, like I said, she's a great person. Smart. Outgoing. Beautiful."

Something in the way he said "beautiful" bugged me. I averted my eyes again, playing with the blue *nazar* around my neck as I tried to parse my feelings. Adrian figured things out first.

"Are you jealous, little dhampir?"

I looked back up at him. "No. If I was going to be jealous over you, I would have gone crazy a long time ago, considering all the girls you mess around with."

"Avery's not the kind of girl you mess around with."

Again, I heard that affection in his voice, that dreaminess. It shouldn't have bothered me. I should have been glad he was interested in another girl. After all, I'd been trying to convince him to leave me alone for a very long time.

Part of the conditions of him giving me money for this trip had involved me promising to give him a fair shot at dating when—and if—I returned to Montana. If he got together with Avery, it would be one less thing for me to worry about.

And honestly, if it had been any other girl except Avery, I probably wouldn't have minded. But somehow, the idea of her enchanting him was just too much. Wasn't it bad enough that I was losing Lissa to her? How was it possible that one girl could so easily take my place? She'd stolen my best friend, and now the guy who'd sworn up and down that I was the one he wanted was seriously considering replacing me.

You're being a hypocrite, a stern voice inside of me said. *Why should you feel so wronged about someone else coming into their lives? You abandoned them. Lissa and Adrian both. They have every right to move on*.

I stood up angrily. "Look, I'm done talking to you tonight. Will you let me out of this dream? I'm not telling you where I am. And I'm not interested in hearing about how wonderful Avery is and how much better than me she is."

"Avery would never act like a little brat," he said. "She wouldn't get so offended that someone actually cares enough to check on her. She wouldn't deny me the chance to learn more about my magic because she was paranoid someone would ruin her crazy attempt to get over her boyfriend's death."

"Don't talk to me about being a brat," I shot back. "You're as selfish and self-centered as usual. It's always about you—even this dream is. You hold me against my will, whether I want it or not, because it amuses you."

"Fine," he said, voice cold. "I'll end this. And I'll end everything between us. I won't be coming back."

"Good. I hope you mean it this time."

His green eyes were the last thing I saw before I woke up in my own bed.

I sat up, gasping. My heart felt like it was breaking, and I almost thought I might cry. Adrian was right—I had been a brat. I'd lashed out at him when it wasn't really deserved. And yet . . . I hadn't been able to help it. I missed Lissa. I even kind of missed Adrian. And now someone else was taking my place, someone who wouldn't just walk away like I had.

I won't be coming back.

And for the first time ever, I had a feeling he really wouldn't be.

THIRTEEN

THE NEXT DAY WAS EASTER. Everyone was up and around, getting ready to go to church. The whole house smelled delicious, filled with the scents of Olena's baking. My stomach rumbled, and I wondered if I could wait until this afternoon for the huge dinner she'd prepared. Even though I wasn't always sure about God, I'd gone to church a lot in my life. Mostly, it was a courtesy to others, a way of being polite and social. Dimitri had gone because he found peace there, and I wondered if going today might offer me some insight on what I should do.

I felt a little shabby accompanying the others. They'd dressed up, but I didn't have anything other than jeans and casual shirts. Viktoria, noticing my dismay, lent me a lacy white blouse that was a little tight but still looked good. Once I was settled with the family into a pew, I looked around, wondering how Dimitri could have taken solace in the Academy's tiny chapel when he'd grown up with this place.

It was huge. It could have held four chapels. The ceilings were higher and more elaborate, and gold decorations and icons of saints seemed to cover every surface. It was overwhelming, dazzling to the eye. Sweet incense hung heavy in the air, so much so that I could actually see the smoke.

There were a lot of people there, human and dhampir, and I was surprised to even spot some Moroi. Apparently, the Moroi visiting town were pious enough to come to church, despite whatever sordid activities they might be engaging in. And speaking of Moroi . . .

"Abe isn't here," I said to Viktoria, glancing around. She was on my left; Olena sat on my right. While he hadn't struck me as the religious type, I'd kind of expected him to follow me here. I hoped that maybe his absence meant he'd left Baia. I was still unnerved by our last encounter. "Did he leave town?"

"I think he's Muslim," Viktoria explained. "But last I knew, he's still around. Karolina saw him this morning."

Damn Zmey. He hadn't left. What was it he'd said? *A good friend or a bad enemy*.

When I said nothing, Viktoria gave me a concerned look. "He's never really done anything bad when he's around. He usually has meetings and then disappears. I meant it before when I said I didn't think he'd hurt you, but now you're worrying me. Are you in some kind of trouble?"

Excellent question. "I don't know. He just seems interested in me, that's all. I can't figure out why."

Her frown deepened. “We won’t let anything happen to you,” she said fiercely.

I smiled, both at her concern and because of her resemblance to Dimitri in that moment. “Thanks. There are some people back home who might be looking for me, and I think that Abe is just . . . checking up on me.” That was a nice way of describing someone who was either going to drag me back to the U.S. kicking and screaming—or just make me vanish for good.

Viktoria seemed to sense I was softening the truth. “Well, I mean it. I won’t let him hurt you.”

The service started, cutting off our conversation. While the priest’s chanting was beautiful, it meant even less to me than church services usually did. It was all in Russian, like at the funeral, and no one was going to bother translating it for me today. It didn’t matter. Still taking in the beauty of my surroundings, I found my mind wandering. To the left of the altar, a golden-haired angel looked at me from a four-foot-tall icon.

An unexpected memory came to me. Dimitri had once gotten permission for me to accompany him on a quick weekend trip to Idaho to meet with some other guardians. Idaho wasn’t any place I was keen on going, but I welcomed the time with him, and he’d convinced school officials that it was a “learning experience.” That had been shortly after Mason’s death, and after the shock wave that tragedy had sent through the school, I think they would have allowed me anything, to be honest.

Unfortunately, there was little that was leisurely or romantic about the trip. Dimitri had a job to do, and he had to do it quickly. So we made the best time we could, stopping only when absolutely necessary. Considering our last road trip had involved us stumbling onto a Moroi massacre, this one being uneventful was probably for the best. As usual, he wouldn’t let me drive, despite my claims that I could get us there in half the time. Or maybe that was *why* he wouldn’t let me drive.

We stopped at one point to get gas and scrounge some food from the station’s store. We were up in the mountains somewhere, in a tiny town that rivaled St. Vladimir’s for remote location. I could see mountains on clear days at school, but it was a totally different experience being in them. They surrounded us and were so close it seemed like you could just jump over and land on one. Dimitri was finishing up with the car. Holding my sub sandwich, I walked around to the back of the gas station to get a better view.

Whatever civilization the gas station offered disappeared as soon as I cleared it. Endless snowy pines stretched out before me, and all was still and quiet, save for the distant sound of the highway behind me. My heart ached over what had happened to Mason, and I was still having nightmares about the Strigoi who’d held us captive. That pain was a long way from disappearing, but something about this peaceful setting soothed me for a moment.

Looking down at the unbroken, foot-high snow, a crazy thought suddenly came to me. I let myself go, falling back-first to the ground. The thick snow embraced me, and I rested there a moment, taking comfort in lying down. Then I moved my legs and arms back and forth, carving out new hollows in the snow. When I finished, I didn’t get up right away. I simply continued

lounging, staring up at the blue, blue sky.

"What," asked Dimitri, "are you doing? Aside from getting your sandwich cold."

His shadow fell over me, and I looked up at his tall form. In spite of the cold, the sun was out, and its rays backlit his hair. He could have been an angel himself, I thought.

"I'm making a snow angel," I replied. "Don't you know what that is?"

"Yes, I know. But why? You must be freezing."

I had on a heavy winter coat, hat, gloves, and all the other requisite cold-weather accessories. He was right about the sandwich. "Not so much, actually. My face is a little, I guess."

He shook his head and gave me a wry smile. "You'll be cold when you're in the car and all that snow starts melting."

"I think you're more worried about the car than about me."

He laughed. "I'm more worried about you getting hypothermia."

"In this? This is nothing." I patted the ground beside me. "Come on. You make one too, and then we can go."

He continued looking down at me. "So I can freeze too?"

"So you can have fun. So you can leave your mark on Idaho. Besides, it shouldn't bother you at all, right? Don't you have some sort of super cold resistance from Siberia?"

He sighed, a smile still on his lips. It was enough to warm me even in this weather. "There you go again, convinced Siberia is like Antarctica. I'm from the *southern* part. The weather's almost the same as here."

"You're making excuses," I told him. "Unless you want to drag me back to the car, you're going to have to make an angel too."

Dimitri studied me for several heavy moments, and I thought he might actually haul me away. His face was still light and open, though, and his expression was filled with a fondness that made my heart race. Then, without warning, he flopped into the snow beside me, lying there quietly.

"Okay," I said when he did nothing more. "Now you have to move your arms and legs."

"I know how to make a snow angel."

"Then do it! Otherwise, you're more like a chalk outline at a police crime scene."

He laughed again, and the sound was rich and warm in the still air. Finally, after a little more coaxing on my part, he moved his arms and legs too, making an angel of his own. When he finished, I expected him to jump up and demand we get back on the road, but instead, he stayed there too, watching the sky and the mountains.

"Pretty, huh?" I asked. My breath made frosty clouds in the air. "I guess in some ways, it's not that different from the ski resort's view . . . but I don't know. I feel different about it all today."

"Life's like that," he said. "As we grow and change, sometimes things we've experienced before take on new meaning. It'll happen for the rest of your life."

I started to tease him about his tendency to always deliver these profound life lessons, but it occurred to me then that he was right. When I'd first begun falling for Dimitri, the feelings had been all-consuming. I'd never felt anything

like it before. I'd been convinced there was no possible way I could love him more. But now, after what I'd witnessed with Mason and the Strigoi, things were different. I did love Dimitri more intensely. I loved him in a different way, in a deeper way. Something about seeing how fragile life was made me appreciate him more. It had made me realize how much he meant to me and how sad I'd be if I ever lost him.

"You think it'd be nice to have a cabin up there?" I asked, pointing to a nearby peak. "Out in the woods where no one could find you?"

"*I* would think it was nice. I think you'd be bored."

I tried to imagine being stuck in the wilderness with him. Small room, fireplace, bed . . . I didn't think it'd be *that* boring. "It wouldn't be so bad if we had cable. And Internet." And body heat.

"Oh, Rose." He didn't laugh, but I could tell he was smiling again. "I don't think you'd ever be happy someplace quiet. You always need something to do."

"Are you saying I have a short attention span?"

"Not at all. I'm saying there's a fire in you that drives everything you do, that makes you *need* to better the world and those you love. To stand up for those you can't. It's one of the wonderful things about you."

"Only one, huh?" I spoke lightly, but his words had thrilled me. He'd meant what he said about thinking those were wonderful traits, and feeling his pride in me meant more than anything just then.

"One of many," he said. He sat up and looked down at me. "So, no peaceful cabin for you. Not until you're an old, old woman."

"What, like forty?"

He shook his head in exasperation and stood up, not gracing my joke with a response. Still, he regarded me with the same affection I'd heard in his voice. There was admiration too, and I thought I could never be unhappy as long as Dimitri thought I was wonderful and beautiful. Leaning down, he extended his hand. "Time to go."

I took it, letting him help pull me up. Once standing, we held hands for a heartbeat longer than necessary. Then we let go and surveyed our work. Two perfect snow angels—one much, much taller than the other. Careful to step inside each outline, I leaned down and hacked out a horizontal line above each head.

"What's that?" he asked, when I stood beside him again.

"Halos," I said with a grin. "For heavenly creatures like us."

"That might be a stretch."

We studied our angels for a few moments more, looking at where we had lain side by side in that sweet, quiet moment. I wished what I'd said was true, that we had truly left our mark on the mountain. But I knew that after the next snowfall, our angels would disappear into the whiteness and be nothing more than a memory.

Dimitri touched my arm gently, and without another word, we turned around and headed back to the car.

Compared to that memory of him and the way he'd looked at me out there on the mountain, I thought the angel looking back at me in church seemed

pale and boring in comparison. No offense to her.

The congregation was filing back to their seats after taking bread and wine. I'd stayed seated for that, but I did understand a few of the priest's words. *Life. Death. Destroy. Eternal.* I knew enough about all this to string together the meaning. I would have bet good money "resurrection" was in there too. I sighed, wishing it were truly that easy to vanquish death and bring back those we loved.

Church ended, and I left with the Belikovs, feeling melancholy. As people passed each other near the entrance, I saw some eggs being exchanged. Viktoria had explained that it was a big tradition around here. A few people I didn't know gave some to me, and I felt a little bad that I had nothing to give in return. I also wondered how I was going to eat them all. They were decorated in various ways. Some were simply colored; others were elaborately designed.

Everyone seemed chatty after church, and we all stood around outside it. Friends and family hugged and caught up on gossip. I stood near Viktoria, smiling and trying to follow the conversation that often took place in both English and Russian.

"Viktoria!"

We turned and saw Nikolai striding toward us. He gave us—by which I mean, he gave her—a brilliant smile. He'd dressed up for the holiday and looked amazing in a sage shirt and dark green tie. I eyed Viktoria, wondering if it had any effect on her. Nope. Her smile was polite, genuinely happy to see him, but there was nothing romantic there. Again, I wondered about her mystery "friend."

He had a couple of guys with him whom I'd met before. They greeted me too. Like the Belikovs, they seemed to think I was a permanent fixture around here.

"Are you still going to Marina's party?" asked Nikolai.

I'd nearly forgotten. That was the party he'd invited us to the first day I'd met him. Viktoria had accepted then, but to my surprise, she now shook her head. "We can't. We have family plans."

That was news to me. There was a possibility something had come up that I didn't know about yet, but I doubted it. I had a feeling she was lying, and being a loyal friend, I said nothing to contradict her. It was hard watching Nikolai's face fall, though.

"Really? We're going to miss you."

She shrugged. "We'll all see each other at school."

He didn't seem pacified by that. "Yeah, but—"

Nikolai's eyes suddenly lifted from her face and focused on something behind us. He frowned. Viktoria and I both glanced back, and I felt her mood shift too.

Three guys were strolling toward my group. They were dhampirs as well. I didn't notice anything unusual about them—smirks aside—but other dhampirs and Moroi gathered outside the church took on expressions similar to those of my companions. Troubled. Worried. Uncomfortable. The three guys came to a stop by us, pushing their way into our circle.

"I thought you might be here, Kolya," said one. He spoke in perfect English,

and it took me a moment to realize he was talking to Nikolai. I would never understand Russian nicknames.

"I didn't know you were back," replied Nikolai stiffly. Studying the two of them, I could see a distinct resemblance. They had the same bronze hair and lean build. Brothers, apparently.

Nikolai's brother's gaze fell on me. He brightened. "And you must be the unpromised American girl." It didn't surprise me that he knew who I was. After the memorial, most of the local dhampirs had left telling tales about the American girl who had fought battles against Strigoi but carried neither a promise mark nor a graduation mark.

"I'm Rose," I said. I didn't know what was up with these guys, but I certainly wasn't going to show any fear in front of them. The guy seemed to appreciate my confidence and shook my hand.

"I'm Denis." He gestured to his friends. "Artur and Lev."

"When did you come to town?" asked Nikolai, still not looking happy about this reunion.

"Just this morning." Denis turned to Viktoria. "I heard about your brother. I'm sorry."

Viktoria's expression was hard, but she nodded politely. "Thank you."

"Is it true he fell defending Moroi?"

I didn't like the sneer in Denis's voice, but it was Karolina who voiced my angry thoughts. I hadn't noticed her approaching our group. She didn't look happy to see Denis at all.

"He fell fighting Strigoi. He died a hero."

Denis shrugged, unaffected by the angry tone of her voice. "Still makes him dead. I'm sure the Moroi will sing his name for years to come."

"They will," I replied. "He saved a whole group of them. And dhampirs too."

Denis's gaze fell back on me, his eyes thoughtful as he studied my face for a few seconds. "I heard you were there too. That both of you were sent into an impossible battle."

"It wasn't impossible. We won."

"Would Dimitri say that if he were alive?"

Karolina crossed her arms over her chest. "If you're only here to start something, then you should leave. This is a church." It was funny. Upon meeting her, I'd thought she seemed so gentle and kind, just an ordinary young mother working to support her family. But in this moment, she seemed more like Dimitri than ever. I could see that same strength within her, that fierceness that drove her to protect loved ones and stand up to her enemies. Not that these guys were her enemies, exactly. I honestly didn't yet understand who they were.

"We're just talking," said Denis. "I just want to understand what happened to your brother. Believe me, I think his death was a tragedy."

"He wouldn't have regretted it," I told them. "He died fighting for what he believed in."

"Defending others who took him for granted."

"That's not true."

"Oh?" Denis gave me a lopsided smile. "Then why don't you work for the

guardians? You've killed Strigoi but have no promise mark. Not even a graduation mark, I heard. Why aren't you out there throwing yourself in front of Moroi?"

"Denis," said Nikolai uneasily, "please just leave."

"I'm not talking to you, Kolya." Denis's eyes were still on me. "I'm just trying to figure Rose out. She kills Strigoi but doesn't work for the guardians. She's clearly not like the rest of you soft people in this town. Maybe she's more like us."

"She's nothing like you," Viktoria snapped back.

I got it then, and a chill ran down my spine. These were the kind of dhampirs that Mark had been talking about. The true unpromised ones. The vigilantes who sought out Strigoi on their own, the ones who neither settled down nor answered to any guardians. They shouldn't have unnerved me, not really. In some ways, Denis was right. In the simplest terms, I really was like them. And yet . . . there was an air about these guys that just rubbed me the wrong way.

"Then why are you in Russia?" asked one of Denis's friends. I already couldn't remember his name. "This is a long trip for you. You wouldn't have come here without a good reason."

Viktoria was picking up her sister's anger. "She came to tell us about Dimka."

Denis eyed me. "I think she's here to hunt Strigoi. There are more in Russia to choose from than there are in the States."

"She wouldn't be in Baia if she was hunting Strigoi, you idiot," returned Viktoria evenly. "She'd be in Vladivostok or Novosibirsk or somewhere like that."

Novosibirsk. The name was familiar. But where had I heard it? A moment later, the answer came to me. Sydney had mentioned it. Novosibirsk was the largest city in Siberia.

Denis continued. "Maybe she's just passing through. Maybe she'll want to join us when we go to Novosibirsk tomorrow."

"For God's sake," I exclaimed. "I'm right here. Stop talking about me like I'm not. And why would I want to go with you?"

Denis's eyes gleamed with an intense, feverish light. "Good hunting there. Lots of Strigoi. Come with us, and you can help us go after them."

"And how many of you will come back from this?" Karolina asked in a hard voice. "Where's Timosha? Where's Vasiliy? Your hunting party keeps getting smaller each time you return here. Which one of you will be next? Whose family will be the next to mourn?"

"Easy for you to talk," retorted the friend. Lev, I think his name was. "You stay here and do nothing while *we* go out and keep you safe."

Karolina gave him a disgusted look, and I recalled how she was dating a guardian. "You go out and rush into situations without thinking. If you want to keep us safe, then stay here and defend your families when they need it. If you want to go after Strigoi, go join the guardians and work with those who have some sense."

"The guardians don't hunt Strigoi!" cried Denis. "They sit and wait and cower before the Moroi."

The unfortunate part was, he had a point. But not entirely.

"That's changing," I said. "There's a movement to start taking the offensive against the Strigoi. There's also talk of the Moroi learning to fight with us. You could help be a part of that."

"Like you are?" he laughed. "You still haven't told us why you're here and not with them. You can say what you want to the rest of this group, but *I* know why you're here. I can see it in you." The crazy, eerie look he gave me almost made me think that he could. "You know the only way to rid the world of evil is to do it on our own. To seek out the Strigoi ourselves and kill them, one by one."

"Without a plan," finished Karolina. "Without any thought of the consequences."

"We're strong and we know how to fight. That's all we need to know when it comes to killing Strigoi."

And that was when I understood. I finally got what Mark had been trying to tell me. Denis was saying exactly what I had been thinking since I left St. Vladimir's. I'd run off without a plan, wanting to throw myself into danger because I felt I had a mission that only I could carry out. Only I could kill Dimitri. Only I could destroy the evil within him. I'd been giving no thought to how I'd pull it off—seeing as Dimitri had beat me more often than not in fights when he was still a dhampir. With a Strigoi's strength and speed now? The odds were definitely against me. Still, I hadn't cared. I'd been obsessed, convinced I had to do this.

In my own head, what I had to do made sense, but now . . . hearing those sentiments from Denis, it sounded crazy. Just as reckless as Mark had warned. Their motives might be good—just as mine were—but they were also suicidal. Without Dimitri, I honestly hadn't cared much about my own life. I'd never been afraid to risk it before, but now I realized there was a big difference between dying uselessly and dying for a reason. If I died trying to kill Dimitri because I had no strategy, then my life would have meant nothing.

Just then, the priest walked over and said something to us in Russian. From his tone and expression, I think he was asking if everything was okay. He'd mingled with the rest of the congregation after the service. Being human, he probably didn't know all the dhampir politics afoot, but he could undoubtedly sense trouble.

Denis offered him a simpering smile and gave what sounded like a polite explanation. The priest smiled in return, nodded, and wandered off when someone else called to him.

"Enough," said Karolina harshly, once the priest was out of earshot. "You need to go. Now."

Denis's body tensed, and mine responded, ready for a fight. I thought he might start something then and there. A few seconds later, he relaxed and turned to me.

"Show them to me first."

"Show you what?" I asked.

"The marks. Show me how many Strigoi you've killed."

I didn't respond right away, wondering if this was a trick. Everyone's eyes were on me. Turning slightly, I lifted the hair off the back of my neck and

showed my tattoos. Little lightning-shaped *molnija* marks were there, along with the mark I'd gotten for the battle. From the sound of Denis's gasp, I was guessing he'd never seen that many kills before. I let my hair go and met his gaze levelly.

"Anything else?" I asked.

"You're wasting your time," he said at last, gesturing to the people behind me. "With them. With this place. You should come with us to Novosibirsk. We'll help make your life worthwhile."

"I'm the only one who can make anything of my life." I pointed down the street. "You were asked to leave. Now go."

I held my breath, still bracing for a fight. After several tense moments, the group retreated. Before turning around, Denis gave me one last piercing look.

"This isn't what you want and you know it. When you change your mind, come find us at 83 Kasakova. We leave at sunrise tomorrow."

"You'll be leaving without me," I said.

Denis' smile sent another chill down my spine. "We'll see."

FOURTEEN

THE ENCOUNTER WITH DENIS LEFT me even more confused than before. It was a shocking illustration of Mark's warning, an omen of what I too might become if I wasn't careful. I wasn't really the same as Denis, was I? I wasn't *aimlessly* seeking danger. I was seeking danger . . . well, for a reason. I had to fulfill the promise I'd made to find Dimitri. Maybe it was suicidal and I was only deluding myself into thinking it was noble.

Viktoria left me little opportunity to ruminate. Later that evening, as the family was settling down in the living room after way too much food, she glibly asked Olena, "Can I go over to Marina's? She's having a party before we go back to school."

Wow. It looked like Abe and the Alchemists weren't the only ones keeping secrets around here. I glanced between Olena and Viktoria's faces, curious as to how this would play out. Olena and Yeva were both knitting, but Yeva didn't look up. Viktoria had spoken in English. Olena's face turned thoughtful.

"You have to leave early tomorrow to go back to school."

"I know. But I can sleep on the bus. Everyone else will be there tonight."

"'Everyone else' isn't a convincing argument," scoffed Olena.

"They'll all be tired tomorrow too," replied Viktoria, grinning.

"You'll miss your last night with Rose."

"I'll hang out with her after I get back."

"Great. And stay up even later."

"Not that late. I'll be back by two."

"Absolutely not. You'll be back by midnight." Olena returned to her knitting. But that had been permission if I'd ever heard it.

Viktoria looked at the clock. It was almost eight thirty. Her face told me she wasn't happy about the curfew, but she apparently decided to take what she could get. Karolina gave us an odd look as we left the room but remained silent. Sonya and Paul, engrossed in TV, barely noticed our departure. I had to find out what was going on.

"Okay," I said once we were heading upstairs, "what gives? I thought you weren't going to Marina's."

Viktoria grinned and beckoned me into her bedroom. I'd recently learned her bedroom used to be Dimitri's, and every time I was in here, I had to resist the urge to go bury myself in the bed, even though I knew the sheets had been washed countless times since those days. Somehow, I could imagine them smelling like Dimitri and feeling warm as though we were both lying there together.

"I'm not." Viktoria began rifling through her closet and pulled out a short, sleeveless red dress with lace around the straps. The fabric was stretchy—the kind that looked like it'd show *everything*. I was shocked when she began putting it on. It was pretty trashy.

"Is this a joke?"

Nope. Viktoria took off her shirt and jeans and pulled the dress on. She had no trouble with it, but it was every bit as clingy as it had appeared. She wasn't as filled out as I was on top, but in a dress like that, it didn't matter.

"Okay," I said, catching on at last. "What's his name?"

"Rolan," she said. "Oh, Rose. He's amazing. And this is the last night I'll get to see him before school."

I didn't know whether to feel happy for her or sad for Nikolai. This Rolan guy must have been the reason she couldn't give Nikolai the time of day. She was totally in love with someone else. Still, that dress . . .

"You must really like him," I observed dryly.

Her eyes widened. "Do you want to meet him?"

"Er, well, I don't want to interfere with your date . . . ."

"You won't. Just stop by and say hi, okay?"

It felt pretty intrusive, yet at the same time . . . well, I was kind of curious about a guy who could get her to leave the house in that kind of outfit, particularly when she started applying really heavy makeup: extra-dark eyeliner and bright red lipstick. So I agreed to meet Rolan, and we left the house as quietly as we could. Despite wearing a coat over her dress, Viktoria still didn't want to run into her mother.

We headed downtown, following a few twists and turns until we ended up behind what looked like an ordinary warehouse in an abandoned part of town. All was quiet, but a tall, tough-looking dhampir stood by a door leading into the building, his arms crossed in front of him. Viktoria brought us to a halt nearby, saying we had to wait there. A minute later, a group of Moroi men of mixed ages wandered up, chatting and laughing. The dhampir gave them a once-over and then opened the door for them. Light and music spilled out until the door shut—and all went silent again.

"So this is Baia's secret dhampir world," I murmured. She didn't hear me because suddenly, her face lit up.

"There he is!"

She pointed to two approaching guys. Both were Moroi. Well, who knew? Viktoria's secret boyfriend wasn't a dhampir. I guessed that wasn't too shocking, really, though the way she'd dressed tonight still bothered me. She gave him a fierce hug and introduced us. His friend was named Sergey, and he smiled politely before hurrying inside where he was apparently meeting a girl too.

I had to give Viktoria credit: Rolan was hot. His hair was dark auburn, soft and wavy. The green of his eyes reminded me—painfully—of Adrian's. And when he smiled at Viktoria, it was dazzling. The look on her face was exactly like Nikolai's whenever he was around her.

Rolan took a hold of Viktoria's hands and brought them to his lips, kissing each one. Those green, green eyes gazed at hers, and he murmured something I couldn't hear. She blushed and replied in Russian. I didn't need any

translation to know the content was sexy and flirty. Still smiling, he glanced over at me, and although she'd introduced us, it was like he was noticing me for the first time—and was interested.

"You're new here, aren't you?" he asked.

Viktoria wrapped her arms around him and rested her head on his chest. "Rose is visiting. She's a friend of the family."

"Ah," he said. "Now I remember hearing about you. I had no idea such a fierce Strigoi killer would be so beautiful."

"It's part of the job description," I said dryly.

"Will you be returning to school with Viktoria?" he asked.

"No. I'll be staying here a little longer." I still had no clue, though, if "a little longer" was one hour or one year.

"Hmm," he said thoughtfully. He looked back down at Viktoria and pressed a kiss to her hair, running his fingers along her throat. His next words were to her. "I'm glad you were able to come here before you left. I don't know how I'll get by with you so far away."

She beamed. "There was no way I could leave without seeing you one more time. . . ." She trailed off, too overcome with emotion, and as he leaned down, hand still on her throat, I thought for an awful moment that they were going to start making out then and there.

Fortunately, the appearance of an approaching dhampir girl interrupted them. Viktoria broke from Rolan and embraced the other girl. They apparently hadn't seen each other in a while and chatted rapidly in Russian, ignoring Rolan and me. Free of her for a moment, he leaned toward me.

"Once Viktoria has returned to school, you'll be all alone here. Maybe I could show you around then?"

"Thanks, but I've already seen everything."

He kept that big smile on. "Of course. Well, then, perhaps we could simply get together and . . . talk?"

I couldn't believe it. This guy had had his hands all over Viktoria thirty seconds ago and was now trying to score plans with me the instant she left town. I was disgusted and had to restrain myself from doing something stupid.

"Sorry, but I don't think I'll be around long enough."

I got the impression that women didn't refuse him very often. He frowned and started to protest, but Viktoria returned and wrapped herself around him again. He studied me for several more puzzled seconds and then shifted his attention to her, smiling and turning on the charm. She ate it all up, and while the two tried to include me in their conversation, it was clear they were totally absorbed in each other. Rolan might be interested in me, but for now, she was an easier target—and one that wouldn't be available much longer. I felt that disgust roil up in me again. The longer we stood out there, the more I realized what was going on. All the people going inside were Moroi guys or dhampir girls. And the girls were all dressed like Viktoria. This was a blood whore den. Suddenly, Baia's secret dhampir world held no appeal.

I hated it. I wanted nothing more than to get out of here. No, wait. I wanted nothing more than to get out of here *and* drag Viktoria away, even kicking and screaming. Rolan was sleazy, no question, and I didn't want her anywhere near him. Yet it soon became clear they weren't going to stand out in the alley

all night. They wanted to go inside and do God only knew what.

"Viktoria," I said, trying to be reasonable, "are you sure you don't want to come back home and hang out? I mean, I won't get to see you tomorrow."

She hesitated, then shook her head. "I won't get to see Rolan either. But I promise I'll come see you as soon as I get home later. We'll stay up all night. Mom won't care."

I didn't know what other protests to make. Rolan's impatience, now that I'd refused him, was starting to show. He wanted to go inside. I wondered what was there . . . a dance floor? Bedrooms? I probably could have gone with them to see for myself, despite being underdressed—or, well, overdressed as far as amounts of clothing went. Yet I couldn't bring myself to do it. All my life, I'd been taught about blood whores and why their lifestyle was wrong. I didn't know if Viktoria was becoming one—and I hoped she wasn't—but there was no way I could set foot in there. It was a matter of principle.

I watched them go with a heavy heart, wondering what I'd just let my friend walk into. Seeing her in that ultra-tight dress, plastered all over him, suddenly made me reevaluate everything. How much of this peaceful life in Baia was a sham? Was Viktoria—the girl who'd called me a sister—really not the person I thought she was? Confused, I turned away to head back home—

—And almost walked into Abe. Again.

"What the hell?" I exclaimed. He wore a tuxedo tonight, complete with tails and a silvery silk scarf. "Are you stalking me?" Stupid question. Of course he was. I hoped his formal wear meant he wouldn't be dragging me off this evening. His guardians were equally well dressed. Idly, I wondered if a place like this had something to do with his illegal business dealings. Was he trafficking blood whores? Like some kind of pimp? Unlikely, seeing as most of these girls didn't require much urging.

Abe gave me that annoying knowing smile of his. "I see your friend is off to an interesting night. I had no idea Viktoria had such lovely legs. Now everyone knows, thanks to that dress."

I clenched my fists and leaned toward him. "Don't you *dare* talk about her like that, old man."

"I'm not saying anything that isn't obvious to everybody else. It'll certainly be obvious to young Rolan soon."

"You don't know anything about them!" Yet I didn't believe my own words, not after seeing them walk off together. Abe, I could tell, knew what I was thinking.

"These girls all say it won't happen to them. But it always does. It's what'll happen to you if you stay."

"Oh, here we are," I said mockingly. "I knew a threat had to be coming. The part where you order me again to leave the country or else bad, bad things will happen."

He gestured toward the door, where more Moroi and dhampirs were going. "I don't even need to make anything bad happen. You'll do it on your own by staying here. You'll waste your life away, running errands for Olena Belikova. Potlucks will become the most exciting thing in your world."

"They're good people," I growled. "Don't mock them."

"Oh, I'm not denying that." He straightened his silk scarf. "They *are* good

people. But they aren't your people. This is a fantasy. You're deluding yourself." He was all sternness now. "Your grief has sent you here. Your man was ripped away from you, and you've ripped yourself away from your old friends. You're trying to make up for it by convincing yourself that this is your family, that this is your home. They're not. This isn't."

"I could make this my home." I still wasn't sure of that, but my stubborn nature made me want to contradict him.

"You aren't meant for Baia," he said, dark eyes blazing. "You're meant for better things. You need to go back home, back to your school and the Dragomir princess."

"How the hell do you know about her? Who *are* you? When are you going to tell me who you work for? What do you want with me?" I had a feeling I was on the verge of hysterics. Hearing him refer to Lissa snapped something inside of me.

"I'm merely an observer who can tell you're wasting your time here. This is no life for you, Rose. Your life is back in the States. They say you were on track to be a great guardian. Do you know what an honor it is to be assigned to the last Dragomir? You could spend your life in elite, powerful circles. The reputation you've already gained will raise you in status and regard. You have a stunning career ahead of you, and it's not too late to go back to it. Not yet."

"Who are you to talk about how I should live my life? I've heard that your hands are bloody—*Zmey*. You're not exactly a good role model. What is it you're involved in, anyway?"

"My own affairs. And it's exactly *because* of the life I lead that you should listen to me when I say abandon this path and go back home."

His words were urgent and authoritative, and I couldn't believe he had the audacity to talk to me like that. "That's not my life anymore," I said icily.

He gave a harsh laugh and gestured around us once more. "What, and this is? You want to go off and be a blood whore like your friend in there?"

"Don't call her that!" I shouted. "I don't care if you've got bodyguards or not. I *will* hurt you, old man, if you say anything else about Viktoria."

He didn't flinch at my explosion. "That was harsh, I admit. She's not a blood whore. Not yet. But she's one step away from it. As I said, it always happens in the end. Even if you aren't used by someone like Rolan Kislyak—and believe me, he *will* use her, just like he did her sister—you'll still end up alone with a baby you're way too young for."

"Her . . . wait." I froze. "Are you saying he's the guy who got Sonya pregnant? Why would Viktoria be involved with him after he did that and left her sister?"

"Because she doesn't know. Sonya doesn't talk about it, and Mr. Kislyak thinks it's a game, getting two sisters into bed. Too bad for him that Karolina's smarter than the others or he could have had them all. Who knows?" He gave me a sardonic smile. "Maybe he'll consider you part of the family enough to go after you next."

"Like hell. I'd never get involved with anyone like that. I'm never going to be involved with anyone again. Not after Dimitri."

Abe's sternness gave way to momentary amusement. "Oh, Rose. You *are* young. You've barely lived. Everyone thinks their first love is the only one

they'll ever have."

This guy was *really* pissing me off, but I gained enough control to decide I wasn't going to punch him. At least, I didn't think so. I backed up a little, toward the building. "I'm not going to play your game here. And you can tell whoever you're working for that I'm not playing theirs either—and that I'm not going back." One way or another, whether it was to hunt Dimitri or live with his family, I was staying in Russia. "You're going to have to box me up and ship me there."

Not that I wanted to give Abe any ideas. I suspected he could do it if he wanted. Damn it. Who was behind this? Who would want to find me badly enough to send this guy after me? Weirder still, whoever it was was someone who cared enough about me to attempt reason. If Abe had actually wanted to abduct me, he already would have. He could have done it the night he brought me to Baia. All he would have had to do was keep driving to the nearest airport. I eventually needed to figure this out, but first I needed to get away from Abe.

I backed up further. "I'm leaving, and you can't stop me. And don't spy on me anymore. This ends now."

Abe studied me for several seconds, his dark eyes narrowed thoughtfully. I could practically see the wheels of plots and world domination spinning in his head. At last he said, so quietly I could hardly hear him, "It won't end with *them*, though."

"Who?"

He pointed at the door. "Viktoria and Rolan."

"What are you getting at?"

"You know what I'm getting at. She thinks she's in love with him. He knows she'll be back in school tomorrow. Tonight's his last chance with her, and he won't waste it. There are lots of bedrooms in there. They're probably in one right now."

I tried to control my breathing. "Then I'll go tell her mother."

"It'll be too late. She'd never find them in time, and tomorrow, Viktoria will be on her way to school—and he'll have no interest anymore. What can her mother do after the fact? Ground her?"

I was getting angry, largely because I had a feeling he was right. "Fine. Then I'll drag her off myself."

"That'll never happen. She *wants* to do this. She won't leave with you. Even if she did, she'd just find him again."

I eyed him. "Enough. You're obviously hinting at something, so just get on with it."

He smiled, apparently pleased at my astuteness—or maybe my bluntness. "If you want to save her, you've got to go through him. Through Rolan."

I scoffed. "Not likely. The only way he'd leave her alone is if I offered to take her place." And hey, friendship only went so far.

"Not if I talk to him."

"What are you going to do, give him a talk on morality and sway him with reason?"

"Oh, I'll sway him, all right. But believe me, I won't do it with reason—well, at least not the kind you're thinking of. If I tell him to leave her alone, he'll

leave her alone. For good."

I stepped backward without realizing it and hit the wall. Abe looked scary as hell. Zmey. I didn't doubt his words at all. He could get Rolan to leave Viktoria alone. In fact, he probably wouldn't even use his dhampirs. Abe could deliver enough terror—and probably a good punch—to make it happen.

"Why would you do that for me?" I asked.

"As a sign of good faith. Promise to leave Baia, and I'll deal with him." His eyes gleamed. Both of us could feel the net closing around me.

"That's your tactic now? You're offering me a trade? My leaving isn't really worth you scaring some Moroi asshole."

The net grew tighter. "Isn't it, Rose?"

Frantically, I thought about what to do. Some part of me thought Viktoria was free to make her own choices, to love whom she wanted . . . but I knew for a fact that Rolan didn't love her. She was a conquest for him, as shown by his willingness to go after me—and Sonya, apparently. What would happen to Viktoria? Would she become like the rest of the women here? Would she be the next Belikov to have a baby? Even if she had no intentions of becoming a guardian, this wasn't the right path for her. Karolina had declined to join the guardians and now lived a respectable life with her kids and a job that—if not exciting—was steady and allowed her to keep her dignity. I couldn't let Viktoria turn down a road that could ruin the rest of her life. I couldn't let that happen to Dimitri's sister.

Dimitri . . .

I knew him. I knew his protective nature. He would *never* let anything happen to those he cared about. I hated the thought of that blood whore den, but I still would have run in to get her—because that was what Dimitri would have done. But I didn't know if I'd find her there in time. I knew, however, that Abe could—and that he could keep Rolan away forever. And so, I spoke without fully understanding the consequences of my words.

"I'll leave Baia."

FIFTEEN

ABE GLANCED OVER AT ONE of his guardians and gave a swift nod. The man instantly walked away. "It's done," Abe said.

"Just like that?" I asked in disbelief.

His lips quirked into a smile. "Rolan knows who I am. He knows who works for me. Once Pavel makes my . . . ah, wishes known, that will be the end of it."

I shivered, knowing Abe spoke the truth. Considering what a smartass I'd been to Abe this whole time, it really was a wonder I hadn't had my feet set in cement and been tossed into the ocean. "So why *aren't* you forcefully dragging me out of here?"

"I never like to make anyone do anything they don't want to. Even Rolan. It's much easier if people simply see reason and do what I ask them to, without the use of force."

"And by 'see reason,' you mean, 'blackmail,'" I said, thinking of what I'd just agreed to.

"We made a trade," he said. "That's all. Don't forget your end of the bargain. You promised to leave here, and you don't seem like the type to go back on your word."

"I don't."

"Rose!"

Viktoria suddenly appeared at the door. Wow, that was fast. Pavel was calmly dragging her by her arm. Her hair was mussed, and a dress strap was slipping from her shoulder. Her face was a mixture of incredulity and anger. "What did you do? That guy came and told Rolan to get out of here and never see me again! And then . . . Rolan agreed. He just left."

I found it slightly funny that Viktoria immediately blamed me for this. True, I was responsible, but Abe was standing right there. It wasn't a secret who his employees were. Nonetheless, I defended my actions.

"He was using you," I said.

There were tears in Viktoria's brown eyes. "He loves me."

"If he loves you, then why did he hit on me as soon as your back was turned?"

"He did not!"

"He's the one who got Sonya pregnant."

Even in the alley's dim lighting, I saw her face pale. "That's a lie."

I threw up my hands. "Why would I make that up? He wanted to make plans with me as soon as you were out of town!"

"If he did," she said, voice shaking, "it was because you led him on."

I gaped. Beside me, Abe listened quietly, a smug look on his face. He was so self-satisfied and probably thought he was being proven right. I wanted to punch him, but Viktoria was my concern.

"How can you think that? I'm your friend!" I told her.

"If you were my friend, you wouldn't be acting like this. You wouldn't try to stand in my way. You act like you loved my brother, but there's no way you could have—no way you really understand love!"

Didn't understand love? Was she crazy? If she only knew what I'd sacrificed for Dimitri, what I'd done to be where I was now . . . all for love. *She* was the one who couldn't understand. Love wasn't a fling in a back room at a party. It was something you lived and died for. My emotions surged, that darkness welling up within me that made me want to lash out in return for her horrible accusation. It was only through the strongest of efforts that I remembered she was already hurting, that she only said the things she did because she was confused and upset.

"Viktoria, I do understand, and I'm sorry. I'm only doing this because you're my friend. I care about you."

"You aren't my friend," she hissed. "You aren't part of this family. You don't understand anything about us or how we live! I wish you'd never come here." She turned and stormed away, pushing back inside through the long line of partygoers. My heart ached as I watched her.

I turned to Abe. "She's going to go try to find him."

He still wore that damnably knowing expression. "It won't matter. He'll have nothing to do with her anymore. Not if he values that pretty face of his." I was worried for Viktoria but kind of had a feeling Abe was right about Rolan. Rolan would no longer be an issue. As for Viktoria's next guy . . . well, that was a worry for another day.

"Fine. Then we're done here. Do not follow me anymore," I growled.

"Keep your promise to leave Baia, and I won't have to."

I narrowed my eyes. "I told you: I always keep my promises."

And as I hurried back to the Belikov house, I suddenly wondered if that was true. The blowout with Abe and Viktoria was like cold water on my face. What was I doing here? To a certain extent, Abe had been right . . . I had been deluding myself, pretending Dimitri's family was my own in order to soothe my grief over him. But they weren't. This wasn't home. The Academy wasn't my home either, not anymore. The only thing I had left was my promise—my promise to Dimitri. The promise I'd somehow lost sight of since coming here.

Some of the Belikov family was in bed when I got home, but others were still in the living room. I slipped upstairs to my room, waiting anxiously for Viktoria to get home. A half hour later, I heard footsteps on the stairs and the sound of her door closing. I knocked gently on it.

"Viktoria," I said in a loud whisper. "It's me. Please talk to me."

"No!" came the response. "I don't ever want to talk to you again."

"Viktoria—"

"Go away!"

"I'm just worried about you."

"You aren't my brother! You aren't even my sister. You have no place here!"

Ouch. Her voice was muffled by the door, but I didn't want to risk a fight in the hall and let the others hear. Going to my room, my heart breaking, I stopped and stood in front of the mirror. It was then that I knew she was right. Even Abe was right. Baia wasn't my place.

In a flash, my meager belongings were packed, but I hesitated before going downstairs. Viktoria's closed door stared at me, and I had to fight the urge to knock again. If I did, it would only trigger another fight. Or, maybe even worse, she would forgive me—and then I would want to stay forever, lost in the comfort of Dimitri's family and their simple life.

Taking a deep breath, I headed downstairs and walked out the front door. I wanted to tell the others goodbye but worried the same thing would happen, that I'd look at their faces and change my mind. I needed to go, I realized. I was angry at both Viktoria and Abe. Their words had hurt me, but there'd been truth in them. This wasn't my world. I had other things to do with my life. And I had a lot of promises to keep.

When I was about eight blocks away, I slowed down, not because I was tired but because I wasn't sure where I was going. Leaving that house had been the biggest step. I sank down on the curb in front of a neighbor's silent, dark yard. I wanted to cry without knowing why. I wanted my old life back. I wanted Dimitri and Lissa. Oh, God, I wanted them.

But Dimitri was gone, and the only way I'd see him was if I truly set out to kill him. And as for Lissa . . . she was more or less gone to me too. Even if I survived this, I didn't think she could forgive me. Sitting there, feeling lost and alone, I tried reaching out to her one more time. I knew it was foolish, considering what I'd seen before, but I had to try one more time. I had to know if I really could have my old place back there. I slipped inside her mind instantly, my runaway emotions making the transition easy. She was on a private jet.

If Jill had been stunned by meeting St. Vladimir's A-list students, going on a trip with them made her downright comatose. She stared at everything wide-eyed and barely said a word during the whole flight to the Royal Court. When Avery offered her a glass of champagne, Jill could barely stammer out, "N-no thanks." After that, the others seemed to forget about her and got carried away by their own conversation. Lissa noticed Jill's uneasiness but didn't do much to remedy it. That was a shock. The Lissa I had known would have gone out of her way to make Jill comfortable and be included. Fortunately, the younger girl seemed perfectly entertained by watching the others' antics.

I also took comfort in knowing Jill would be okay once she met up with Mia. Lissa had sent word ahead to Mia to come pick up Jill when they landed, seeing as Lissa and the others had to attend to one of Tatiana's functions right away. Mia had said she'd take Jill under her wing for the weekend and show her some of the innovative things she'd learned to do with her water magic. Lissa was glad for this, happy she wouldn't be babysitting a freshman all weekend.

Even if Jill was totally off of Lissa's radar, one person wasn't: Avery's brother Reed. Their father had decided it would be a good idea for Reed to go with them, and seeing as Mr.—excuse me—*Headmaster* Lazar had played a key role in working with Tatiana to arrange this trip, there was little argument.

Avery had rolled her eyes and spoken to Lissa about it covertly, just before boarding.

"We're all riding your reputation," Avery said. "Part of the reason Dad let me come was because you're in good with the queen, and he wants it to rub off on me. He's then hoping *I'll* get in good with her, and then that'll rub off on Reed—and the rest of the family."

Lissa tried not to overthink the logic too much. Mostly, she was bothered because Reed Lazar was still as unpleasant as he'd been the first day they met. He wasn't really mean or anything; it just made her uncomfortable being around him. Really, he was the polar opposite of Avery. Whereas she was animated and could always strike up conversation, he stayed tight-lipped and spoke only when spoken to. Lissa couldn't really tell if it was shyness or disdain.

When Lissa had tried asking him if he was excited to go to Court, Reed had simply shrugged. "Whatever. I don't care." His tone had been almost hostile, like he resented her for asking, so she'd given up all other attempts at conversation. The only person, other than his sister, that Lissa saw Reed ever speak to was Avery's guardian Simon. He had also come along.

When the flight landed, Mia was as good as her word. She waved enthusiastically when Lissa stepped off the plane, her blond curls whipping around in the wind. Lissa grinned back, and they gave each other quick half-hugs, something that never failed to amuse me given their former enemy status.

Lissa made introductions for those who needed them as an escort of guardians led them away from the landing strip and toward the inner portion of Court. Mia welcomed Jill so warmly that the younger girl's uneasiness faded, and excitement glowed in her green eyes. Smiling fondly, Mia glanced away from Jill and over to Lissa.

"Where's Rose?"

Silence fell, followed by uncomfortable glances.

"What?" demanded Mia. "What did I say?"

"Rose is gone," said Lissa. "Sorry . . . I thought you knew. She dropped out and left after the attack because there were some things . . . some personal things . . . she needed to take care of."

Lissa feared Mia would ask about the personal things. Only a few people knew about my search for Dimitri, and Lissa wanted to keep it that way. Most thought I'd just disappeared from post-battle trauma. Mia's next question completely shocked Lissa.

"Why didn't you go with her?"

"What?" Lissa stammered. "Why would I do that? Rose dropped out. No way am I going to."

"Yeah, I suppose." Mia turned speculative. "You guys are just so close—even without the bond. I assumed you'd follow each other to the ends of the earth and figure out the details later." Mia's own life had gone through so much upheaval that she took that kind of thing in stride.

That weird, fluctuating anger I'd been feeling pop up in Lissa every so often suddenly reared its head and turned on Mia. "Yeah, well, if we were so close, then it seems like she wouldn't have left in the first place. She's the selfish

one, not me."

The words stung me and clearly shocked Mia. Mia had a temper of her own, but she sat on it and simply held up her hands in an apologetic way. She really had changed. "Sorry. Wasn't trying to accuse you of anything."

Lissa said nothing else. Since my departure, she'd beat herself up about a lot of things. She'd gone over and over things she could have done for me before or after the attack, things that might have made me stay. But it had never occurred to her to go with me, and the revelation hit her like a smack to the face. Mia's words made her feel guilty and angry all at the same time—and she wasn't sure who she was the maddest at: me or herself.

"I know what you're thinking," said Adrian a few minutes later, once Mia had led Jill away and promised to meet up later.

"What, you read minds now?" asked Lissa.

"Don't have to. It's written all over your face. And Rose never would have let you go with her, so stop agonizing over it."

They entered the royal guest housing, which was just as lush and opulent as it had been when I'd stayed there. "You don't know that. I could have talked her into it."

"No," said Adrian sharply. "You couldn't have. I'm serious—don't give yourself one more thing to be depressed about."

"Hey, who said I'm depressed? Like I said, she abandoned *me*."

Adrian was surprised. Since my departure, Lissa had been more sad than anything. She'd occasionally been angry at my decision, but neither Adrian nor I had seen such vehemence from her. Dark feelings boiled within her heart.

"I thought you understood," said Adrian, with a small, puzzled frown. "I thought you said you'd—"

Avery suddenly interrupted, giving Adrian a sharp look. "Hey, hey. Leave her alone, okay? We'll see you at the reception."

They were at a point where the groups had to split, girls going to one part of the lodging and guys to the other. Adrian looked like he wanted to say more, but instead he nodded and headed off with Reed and a couple of guardians. Avery put a gentle arm around Lissa as she glared at Adrian's retreating figure.

"You okay?" Avery's normally laughing face was filled with concern. It startled Lissa in the same way Adrian's moments of seriousness always startled me.

"I guess. I don't know."

"Don't beat yourself up over what you could have or should have done. The past is gone. Move on to the future."

Lissa's heart was still heavy, her mood blacker than it had been in quite a while. She managed a tight smile. "I think that's the wisest thing you've ever said."

"I know! Can you believe it? Do you think it'll impress Adrian?"

They dissolved into laughter, yet despite her cheery exterior, Lissa was still struck by Mia's offhand comments. They plagued Lissa in a way she hadn't thought possible. What really bothered her the most wasn't the thought that if she'd come with me, she could have kept me out of trouble. No. Her biggest

issue was that she hadn't thought of coming with me in the first place. I was her best friend. As far as she was concerned, that should have been her immediate reaction to my departure. It hadn't been, and now Lissa was racked with even more guilt than usual. The guilt was all-consuming, and she would occasionally transform it to anger to ease the pain. It didn't help much.

Her mood didn't improve as the evening progressed, either. Not long after the group's arrival, the queen hosted a small reception for the most elite of all visitors who had come to the Court. Lissa was quickly discovering that the queen always seemed to be hosting some party or another. At one point in her life, Lissa would have considered that fun. She no longer did, at least not when it came to these kinds of parties.

But keeping her dark feelings locked up, Lissa stayed good at playing the role of nice royal girl. The queen seemed happy that Lissa had a "suitable" royal friend and was equally pleased when Lissa impressed other royals and dignitaries she was introduced to. At one point, though, Lissa's resolve nearly faltered.

"Before you leave," said Tatiana, "we should see about your guardians."

She and Lissa stood together with a group of admirers and hangers-on who were keeping respectful distances. Lissa had been staring vacantly at the bubbles in her untouched champagne and looked up with a start.

"Guardians, your majesty?"

"Well, there's no delicate way to put this, but now, for better or for worse, you're without any protection." The queen paused respectfully. "Belikov was a good man."

My name naturally didn't come to her lips. I might as well have never existed. She'd never liked me, particularly since she thought I was going to run off with Adrian. As it was, Lissa had noticed Tatiana watching with some consideration while Avery and Adrian flirted. It was hard to say if the queen disapproved. Her partying aside, Avery seemed a model girl—save that Tatiana had wanted Lissa and Adrian to eventually get together.

"I don't need any protection right now," said Lissa politely, her heart clenching.

"No, but you'll be out of school soon enough. We think we've found some excellent candidates for you. One of them's a woman—a lucky find."

"Janine Hathaway offered to be my guardian," said Lissa suddenly. I hadn't known that, but as she spoke, I read the story in her mind. My mom had approached her not long after I left. I was a little shocked. My mom was very loyal to her current assignment. This would have been a big move for her.

"Janine Hathaway?" Tatiana's eyebrows rose nearly to her hairline. "I'm sure she has other commitments. No, we've got much better choices. This young lady's only a few years older than you."

A better choice than Janine Hathaway? Not likely. Before Dimitri, my mother had been the gold standard by which I measured all badassedness. Tatiana's "young lady" was undoubtedly someone under the queen's control—and more importantly, not a Hathaway. The queen didn't like my mom any more than she liked me. Once, when Tatiana had been bitching me out for something, she'd made a reference to a man my mother had been involved with—someone whom I suspected might be my father, a guy named Ibrahim.

The funny thing was, the queen had almost sounded like *she* had once had an interest in the guy too, and I had to wonder if that was part of her dislike for my family.

Lissa put on a tight, polite smile for the queen and thanked her for the consideration. Lissa and I both understood what was going on. This was Tatiana's game. Everyone was part of her plan, and there was no way to go against her. For a brief moment, Lissa had that strange thought again, of something Victor Dashkov had once said to her. Aside from his crazy killing and kidnapping schemes, Victor had also wanted to start a revolution among the Moroi. He thought the power distribution was off—something Lissa occasionally believed too—and that it was wielded unfairly by those with too much control. The moment was gone almost as soon as it came. Victor Dashkov was a crazy villain whose ideas deserved no acknowledgment.

Then, as soon as courtesy allowed, Lissa excused herself from the queen and headed across the room, feeling like she was going to explode with grief and anger. She nearly ran into Avery as she did.

"God," said Avery. "Do you think Reed could embarrass me any more? Two people have tried to make conversation with him, and he keeps scaring them off. He actually just told Robin Badica to shut up. I mean, yeah, she was going on and on, but still. That is not cool." Avery's dramatic look of exasperation faded as she took in Lissa's face. "Hey, what's wrong?"

Lissa glanced at Tatiana and then turned back to Avery, taking comfort in her friend's blue-gray eyes. "I need to get out of here." Lissa took a deep, calming breath. "Remember all that good stuff you said you knew about? When is that going to happen?"

Avery smiled. "As soon as you want."

I returned to myself, sitting there on the curb. My emotions were still going crazy, and my eyes were fighting off tears. My earlier doubts were confirmed: Lissa didn't need me anymore ... and yet, I still had that feeling that there was something odd going on that I couldn't quite put a finger on. I supposed her guilt over Mia's comment or spirit side effects could be affecting her, but still . . . she wasn't the same Lissa.

Footsteps on the pavement made me look up. Of all the people who might have found me, I would have expected Abe or maybe Viktoria. But it wasn't.

It was Yeva.

The old woman stood there, a shawl draped over her narrow shoulders, and her sharp, cunning eyes looking down at me disapprovingly. I sighed.

"What happened? Did a house fall on your sister?" I asked. Maybe there was a benefit to our language barrier. She pursed her lips.

"You can't stay here any longer," she said.

My mouth dropped open.

"You . . . you speak English?"

She snorted. "Of course."

I shot up. "All this time you've been pretending not to? You've been making Paul play translator?"

"It's easier," she said simply. "You avoid a lot of annoying conversation when you don't speak the language. And I've found that Americans make the

most annoying conversation of all."

I was still aghast. "You don't even know me! But from the first day, you've been giving me hell. Why? Why do you hate me?"

"I don't hate you. But I am disappointed."

"Disappointed? How?"

"I dreamed you would come."

"I heard that. You dream a lot?"

"Sometimes," she said. The moonlight glinted in her eyes, enhancing her otherworldly appearance. A chill ran down my spine. "Sometimes my dreams are true. Sometimes not. I dreamed Dimka was dead, but I didn't want to believe it, not until I had proof. You were my proof."

"And that's why you were disappointed?"

Yeva drew the shawl more tightly around her. "No. In my dreams, you shone. You burned like a star, and I saw you as a warrior, someone who could do great deeds. Instead? You've sat around and moped. You've done nothing. You haven't done what you came to do."

I studied her, wondering if she really knew what she was talking about. "And what is that exactly?"

"You know what it is. I dreamed that, too."

I waited for more. When it didn't come, I laughed. "Nice vague answer. You're as bad as any scam fortune-teller."

Even in the darkness, I could see the anger kindle in her eyes. "You've come to search for Dimka. To try to kill him. You must find him."

"What do you mean 'try'?" I didn't want to believe her, didn't want to believe she might actually know my future. Nonetheless, I found myself getting hooked in. "Have you seen what happens? Do I kill him?"

"I can't see everything."

"Oh. Fantastic."

"I only saw that you must find him."

"But that's all you've got? I already knew that!"

"It's what I saw."

I groaned. "Damn it, I don't have time for these cryptic clues. If you can't help me, then don't say anything."

She stayed quiet.

I slung my bag over my shoulder. "Fine. I'm leaving then." And like that, I knew where I would go. "Tell the others . . . well, tell them thank you for everything. And that I'm sorry."

"You're doing the right thing," she said. "This isn't where you should be."

"So I've heard," I muttered, walking away.

I wondered if she'd say anything else: chastise me, curse me, give me more mysterious words of "wisdom." But she stayed silent, and I didn't look back.

I had no home, not here and not in America. The only thing left for me was to do what I'd come to do. I had told Abe I kept my promises. I would. I'd leave Baia like I told him. And I'd kill Dimitri, as I'd promised myself I would.

I knew where to go now. The address had never left my mind: 83 Kasakova. I didn't know where it was, but once I reached the town's center, I found a guy walking down the street who gave me directions. The address was close by, only about a mile, and I headed out at a brisk pace.

When I reached the house, I was glad to see that the lights were still on. Even as pissed off and raging as I was, I didn't want to wake anyone up. I also didn't want to speak to Nikolai and was relieved when Denis opened the door.

His expression was all astonishment when he saw me. Despite his bold words back at the church earlier, I don't think he'd really believed I'd join him and the other unpromised ones. He was speechless, so I did the talking.

"I changed my mind. I'm coming with you." I took a deep breath, bracing myself for what came next. I'd promised Abe I'd leave Baia—but I hadn't promised to return to the U.S. "Take me to Novosibirsk."

SIXTEEN

DENIS AND HIS TWO UNPROMISED friends, Artur and Lev, were ecstatic that I was going to be part of their posse. But if they expected me to share their crazy enthusiasm for reckless Strigoi hunting, they were about to be sorely disappointed. In fact, it didn't take long after I joined them before they realized that I was approaching the hunt very differently than they were. Denis's friend Lev had a car, and we took turns driving to Novosibirsk. The drive was about fifteen hours, and even though we stopped at a hotel for the night, it was still a lot of continuous time to be cooped up in a small space with three guys who couldn't stop talking about all the Strigoi they were going to kill.

In particular, they kept trying to draw me out. They wanted to know about how many Strigoi I'd slain. They wanted to know what the battle at the Academy had been like. They wanted to know my methods. Anytime my mind turned to those topics, though, all I could think of was blood and grief. It was nothing I wanted to brag about, and it took about six hours on the road for them to finally figure out that they weren't going to get much information from me.

Instead, they regaled me with tales of their own adventures. To be fair, they'd slain several Strigoi—but they'd lost a number of their friends, all of whom had been in their teens, like these guys. My experiences weren't that dissimilar; I'd lost friends too. My losses had been a result of being outnumbered, though. Denis's group's casualties seemed to have been more due to rushing in to without thinking. Indeed, their plan once we got to Novosibirsk wasn't really that solid. They reiterated that Strigoi liked to hunt at places that were crowded at night, like dance clubs, or in remote places like alleys, that made for easy pickings. No one noticed as much when people disappeared from those kinds of places. So Denis's plans mostly involved trolling those hot spots in the hopes that we'd run into Strigoi.

My initial thought was to immediately ditch this group and strike out on my own. After all, my main goal had been to simply get to Novosibirsk. With everything I'd learned now, it seemed logical that Siberia's largest city would be the next best place to look. Then, the more I thought about it, the more I realized that jumping into the Strigoi scene alone would be as stupid as one of the unpromised gang's plans. I could use their backup. Plus, since I didn't actually know where Dimitri was yet, I had to come up with a method of getting some information. I'd need help for that.

We made it to Novosibirsk at the end of the second day of driving. Despite

hearing about its size, I hadn't imagined it would be anything like Moscow or Saint Petersburg. And true, it turned out to be not quite as large as they were, but it was still just as much a city, complete with skyscrapers, theaters, commuters, and the same beautiful architecture.

We crashed with a friend of theirs who had an apartment downtown, a dhampir named Tamara. Her English wasn't very good, but from the sounds of it, she was another unpromised one and just as excited as everyone else to rid the world of Strigoi. She was a little older than the rest of us, which was why she had her own place, and was a cute brunette with freckles. It sounded as though she waited until whenever the guys came to town to hunt, which I took as a small blessing. At least she didn't go out alone. She seemed particularly excited to have another girl around, but like the others, she quickly picked up that I didn't share their enthusiasm.

When our first night of Strigoi hunting came around, I finally stepped up into a leadership position. The sudden change in behavior startled them at first, but they soon listened with rapt attention, still caught up in my superstar reputation.

"Okay," I said, looking from face to face. We were in Tamara's tiny living room, sitting in a circle. "Here's how it's going to work. We're going to hit the nightclub scene as a group, patrolling it and the alleys behind it for—"

"Wait," interrupted Denis. "We usually split up."

"Which is why you get killed," I snapped. "We're going as a group."

"Haven't you killed Strigoi by yourself, though?" asked Lev. He was the tallest of the group, with a long and lanky figure that was almost Moroi-like.

"Yes, but I got lucky." That, and I also just thought I was a better fighter than any of them. Call me arrogant, but I was a damned good guardian. Or near-guardian. "We'll do better with all five of us. When we find Strigoi, we've got to make sure we take care of them in an isolated place." I hadn't forgotten Sydney's warnings. "But before we kill them, I need to talk to them. It'll be your job to restrain them."

"Why?" asked Denis. "What do you have to say to them?"

"Actually, it's what *they* have to say to *me*. Look, it won't take long. And you'll get to make your kill in the end, so don't worry about it. But . . ." This next part went against my grand plans, but I knew I had to say it. I wouldn't get them killed for the sake of my own quest. "If we get ourselves in a situation where you're trapped or in *immediate* danger, forget the talking and restraining. Kill. Save yourself."

Apparently, I seemed confident and badass enough that they decided to go along with whatever I said. Part of our plan involved going "undercover," so to speak. Any Strigoi who was close or got a good enough look would immediately recognize us as dhampirs. It was important that we not attract any attention. We needed a Strigoi scanning for victims to pass right over us. We needed to look like other human club-goers.

So we dressed the part, and I was a bit astonished at how well the guys cleaned up. Denis, crazy or not, was particularly good-looking, sharing the same dark gold hair and brown eyes that his brother Nikolai had. My few changes of clothes weren't quite up to partying standards, so Tamara delved into her wardrobe for me. She seemed to take a lot of delight in finding things

for me to wear. We were actually similar in size, which was kind of amazing. With her tall, super-slim build, Lissa and I had never been able to share clothes. Tamara was my height and had a similar body type.

She first offered me a short, tight dress that was so similar to the one Viktoria had worn that I just shook my head and handed it back. The memories of our argument still hurt, and I wasn't going to relive that night or in any way play blood whore dress-up. Instead, Tamara settled for dressing me in black jeans and a black tank top. I consented to hair and makeup too, and studying myself in the mirror, I had to admit she did a good job. As vain as it was, I liked looking good. I especially liked that the guys looked at me in a way that was admiring and respectful—but not like I was some piece of meat. Tamara offered me jewelry too, but the only thing I'd wear was the *nazar* around my neck. My stake required a jacket, but she found a sexy leather one that didn't take away from the rest of the outfit's appeal.

Setting out around midnight, I couldn't help shaking my head. "We're the goddamned hottest vampire hunters ever," I muttered.

Denis led us to a club where they'd found Strigoi before. It was also apparently where one of their unpromised friends had been killed. It was in a seedy part of town, which I guess added to its appeal for Strigoi. A lot of the people there were middle- and upper-class young people, apparently drawn in by the "dangerous" aspect. If only they'd known just how dangerous it was. I'd made a lot of jokes to Dimitri about Russia and Eastern Europe being ten years behind in music, but when we entered, I discovered the ground-thumping techno song playing was something I'd heard in the U.S. just before leaving.

The place was crowded and dark, with flashing lights that were actually a little annoying to dhampir eyes. Our night vision would adapt to the darkness and then be blasted when a strobe light kicked on. In this case, I didn't need my sight. My shadow-kissed senses didn't feel any Strigoi in the area.

"Come on," I said to the others. "Let's dance for a while and wait. There are no Strigoi nearby."

"How do you know?" asked Denis, staring at me in wonder.

"I just do. Stay together."

Our little circle moved to the dance floor. It had been so long since I'd danced, and I was a bit surprised at how quickly I found myself getting into the rhythm. Part of me said I should have stayed ever vigilant, but my Strigoi alarm system would immediately snap me awake if any danger came. That nausea was kind of hard to ignore.

But after an hour of dancing, no Strigoi had appeared. We left the dance floor and started circling the club's edges, then moved outside to sweep that area too. Nothing.

"Is there another club nearby?" I asked.

"Sure," said Artur. He was stocky, with close-shaved hair and a ready smile. "A couple blocks over."

We followed him and found a similar scene: another secret club hidden in a run-down building. More flashing lights. More crowds. More pounding music. Disturbingly, what started to bother me first was the smell. That many people generated a lot of sweat. I had no doubt even the humans could smell it. To us, it was cloying. Tamara and I exchanged looks and wrinkled our noses,

needing no words to convey our disgust.

We moved to the dance floor again, and Lev started to leave to get a drink. I punched him in the arm.

He exclaimed something in Russian that I recognized as a swear word. "What was that for?" he asked.

"For being stupid! How do you expect to kill something that's twice as fast as you while *drunk*?"

He shrugged, unconcerned, and I resisted the urge to hit him in the face this time. "One won't hurt. Besides, there aren't even any—"

"Be quiet!"

It was creeping over me, that weird stirring in my stomach. Forgetting my cover, I stopped dancing, scanning the crowd for the source. While I was relying on my senses to feel Strigoi, spotting them in the crowd was a bit harder. I took a few steps toward the entrance, and my nausea lessened. I moved toward the bar, and the feeling increased.

"This way," I told them. "Act like you're still into the music."

My tension was contagious, and I saw the anticipation sweep them—as well as a little fear. Good. Maybe they'd take this seriously. As we headed in the bar's direction, I tried to keep my body language oriented toward it, like I was seeking a drink. All the while, my eyes swept the crowd's periphery.

There. I had him. A male Strigoi was standing off in a corner, his arm around a girl close to my age. In the dim lighting, he almost seemed attractive. I knew closer examination would reveal the deathly pale skin and red eyes that all Strigoi had. The girl might not have been able to see them in the darkened club, or the Strigoi might have been using compulsion on her. Probably both, judging from the smile on her face. Strigoi were able to compel others just as well as a spirit user like Lissa could. Better, even. Before our eyes, I saw the Strigoi lead the girl down a small, unnoticed hallway. At the end, I could just make out a glowing exit sign. At least, I presumed it was an exit sign. The letters were Cyrillic.

"Any idea where that door goes?" I asked the others.

The guys shrugged, and Denis repeated my question to Tamara. She answered back, and he translated. "There's a small alley out back where they keep trash. It's between this building and a factory. No one's usually there."

"Can we get to it by going around the club?"

Denis waited for Tamara's response. "Yes. It's open on both sides."

"Perfect."

We hurried out of the club by the front door, and I divided our group into two. The plan was to come at the Strigoi from both sides and trap him in the middle—provided he and his victim were still out back. It was possible he could have led her elsewhere, but I thought it more likely he'd want to subdue her and get his blood right there, particularly if it was as deserted as Tamara said it usually was.

I was right. Once my group had split off and peered around behind the club, I saw the Strigoi and the girl lurking in the shadow of a trash can. He was leaning over her, mouth near her neck, and I silently swore. They didn't waste any time. Hoping she was still alive, I came charging down the alley, the others on my heels. From the alley's other side, Denis and Lev also came

running. As soon as he heard the first footfall, the Strigoi reacted instantly, his staggeringly fast reflexes kicking in. He immediately dropped the girl, and in the space of a heartbeat, he chose Denis and Lev over Artur, Tamara, and me. Not a bad strategy, really. There were only two of them. Because he was so fast, he probably hoped to incapacitate them quickly and then turn on us before we could flank him.

And it almost worked. A powerful hit sent Lev flying. To my relief, a couple of trash cans blocked him from the building's wall. Hitting them wouldn't feel good, but if I had the choice, I'd rather hit metal cans than solid bricks. The Strigoi pounced on Denis next, but Denis proved remarkably fast. Unfairly, I'd assumed none of these unpromised had any real fighting skills. I should have known better. They'd had the same training as me; they just lacked discipline.

Denis dodged the blow and struck out low, aiming for the Strigoi's legs. The hit landed, though it wasn't strong enough to knock him over. A flash of silver showed in Denis's hands, and he managed to partially swipe the Strigoi's cheek just before a backhanded slap knocked the dhampir into me. A cut like that wouldn't be lethal to the Strigoi, but the silver would hurt, and I heard him snarl. His fangs gleamed with saliva.

I sidestepped Denis quickly enough that he didn't knock me over. Tamara grabbed his arm, holding him so that he wouldn't fall either. She was fast too and had barely steadied him before leaping up at the Strigoi. He swatted her away but didn't manage to hit her hard enough to push her far. Artur and I were on him by that point, our combined force knocking him against the wall. Still, he was stronger and the pinning was brief before he broke free. A responsible voice in my head—that sounded suspiciously like Dimitri's—warned me that that had been my window to kill him. It would have been the smart and safe thing to do. I'd had the opening, and my stake was in my hand. If my crazy interrogation plan failed, the others' deaths would be on my head.

As one, Artur and I leapt out again. "Help us!" I yelled.

Tamara threw herself against the Strigoi, landing a swift kick to the stomach as well. I could feel him starting to shake us off, but then Denis joined in too. Between the four of us, we wrestled the Strigoi down so that he lay back-first on the pavement. But the worst wasn't over. Keeping him down wasn't easy. He thrashed around with incredible strength, limbs twisting everywhere. I heaved myself up, trying to throw my body's weight across his torso while the others restrained his legs. Another set of hands joined us, and I looked up to see Lev lending his strength too. His lip was bleeding, but his face was determined.

The Strigoi hadn't stopped moving, but I felt satisfied he wouldn't break away anytime soon, not with all five of us holding him. Shifting forward, I placed the point of my stake at his neck. It gave him pause, but he soon resumed his struggle. I leaned over his face.

"Do you know Dimitri Belikov?" I demanded.

He shouted something incomprehensible at me that didn't sound very friendly. I pressed the stake in harder and drew a long gash against his throat. He screamed in pain, pure evil and malice shining out from his eyes as he continued swearing in Russian.

"Translate," I demanded, not caring who did it. "What I said."

A moment later, Denis said something in Russian, presumably my question since I heard Dimitri's name in there. The Strigoi growled back a response, and Denis shook his head. "He says he isn't going to play games with us."

I took the stake and slashed at the Strigoi's face, widening the gash Denis had made earlier. Again, the Strigoi cried out, and I prayed club security wouldn't hear any of this. I gave him a smile filled with enough malice to match his own.

"Tell him we're going to keep playing games with him until he talks. One way or another, he dies tonight. It's up to him whether it happens slowly or quickly."

I honestly couldn't believe those words had come out of my mouth. They were so harsh . . . so, well, cruel. I'd never in my entire life expected to be torturing anyone, even a Strigoi. The Strigoi gave Denis's translation another defiant response, and so I kept on with the stake, making gashes and cuts that would have killed any human, Moroi, or dhampir.

Finally, he shot off a string of words that didn't sound like his usual insults. Denis immediately translated. "He said he's never heard of anyone named that and that if Dimitri's a friend of yours, he'll be sure to kill him slowly and painfully."

I almost smiled at the Strigoi's last effort at defiance. The problem with my strategy here was that the Strigoi could be lying. I'd have no way of knowing. Something in his response made me think he wasn't. He'd sounded like he thought I was referring to a human or a dhampir, not a Strigoi.

"He's useless then," I said. I leaned back and glanced at Denis. "Go ahead and kill him."

It was what Denis had been dying to do. He didn't hesitate, his stake striking hard and swift through the Strigoi's heart. The frantic struggling stilled a moment later. The evil light faded from the red eyes. We stood up, and I saw my companions' faces watching me with apprehension and fear.

"Rose," asked Denis at last. "What are you hoping to—"

"Never mind that," I interrupted, moving over to the unconscious human girl's side. Kneeling down, I examined her neck. He'd bitten her, but not much blood had been taken. The wound was relatively small and bled only a little. She stirred slightly and moaned when I touched her, which I took as a good sign. Carefully, I dragged her away from the trash can and out into the light where she'd be most noticeable. The Strigoi, however, I dragged into as dark a place as I could, almost completely obscuring him. After that, I asked to borrow Denis's cell phone and dialed the number I'd kept crumpled in my pocket for the last week.

After a couple of rings, Sydney answered in Russian. She sounded sleepy.

"Sydney? This is Rose."

There was a slight pause. "Rose? What's going on?"

"Are you back in Saint Petersburg?"

"Yes . . . where are you?"

"Novosibirsk. Do you guys have agents here?"

"Of course," she said warily. "Why?"

"Mmm . . . I've got something for you to clean up."

"Oh dear."

"Hey, at least I'm calling. And it's not like me ridding the world of another Strigoi is a bad thing. Besides, didn't you want me to let you know?"

"Yes, yes. Where are you?"

I put Denis on the phone briefly so that he could explain our specific location. He handed the phone back to me when he finished, and I told Sydney about the girl.

"Is she seriously injured?"

"Doesn't look like it," I said. "What should we do?"

"Leave her. The guy who's coming will make sure she's okay and doesn't go telling stories. He'll explain it when he gets there."

"Whoa, hey. I'm not going to be here when he arrives."

"Rose—"

"I'm out of here," I told her. "And I'd really appreciate it if you didn't tell anyone else that I called—say, like, Abe."

"Rose—"

"Please, Sydney. Just don't tell. Or else . . ." I hesitated. "If you do, I'll stop calling when this happens. We're going to be taking down a few more." God, what next? First torture, now threats. Worse, I was threatening someone I liked. Of course, I was lying. I understood why Sydney's group did what they did, and I wouldn't risk the exposure. She didn't know that, though, and I prayed she'd think I was just unstable enough to risk revealing us to the world.

"Rose—" she tried yet again. I didn't give her the chance.

"Thanks, Sydney. We'll be in touch." I disconnected and handed Denis the phone. "Come on, guys. We're not done tonight."

It was clear they thought I was crazy to be interrogating Strigoi, but considering how reckless they were sometimes, my behavior wasn't quite weird enough for them to lose their faith in me. Soon they grew enthusiastic again, high on the idea of our first kill on this trip. My uncanny ability to sense Strigoi made me even cooler in their eyes, and I grew confident they'd pretty much follow me anywhere.

We caught two more Strigoi that night and managed to repeat the procedure. The results were the same. Lots of insults in Russian. No new information. Once I was convinced a Strigoi had nothing to offer us, I'd let the unpromised go in for the kill. They loved it, but after that third one, I found myself growing weary both mentally and physically. I told the group we were going to go home—and then, while cutting around the back of a factory, I sensed a fourth Strigoi.

We jumped him. Another scuffle occurred, but we eventually managed to pin him as we had the others. "Go ahead," I told Denis. "You know what to—"

"I'm going to rip your throat out!" the Strigoi snarled.

Whoa. This one spoke English. Denis opened his mouth to begin the interrogation, but I shook my head. "I'll take over." Like the other Strigoi, he swore and struggled, even with the stake against his neck, making it hard for me to talk.

"Look," I said growing impatient and tired, "just tell us what we need to know. We're looking for a dhampir named Dimitri Belikov."

"I know him." The Strigoi's voice was smug. "And he's no dhampir."

Without realizing it, I'd called Dimitri a dhampir. I was tired and had slipped up. No wonder this Strigoi was so pleased to talk. He assumed we didn't know about Dimitri turning. And like any arrogant Strigoi, he was happy to tell us more, clearly in the hopes of causing us pain.

"Your friend has been awakened. He stalks the night with us now, drinking the blood of foolish girls like you."

In a split second, a thousand thoughts raced through my head. Holy crap. I'd come to Russia thinking it would be easy to find Dimitri. I'd had those hopes dashed in his hometown, nearly causing me to give up, and I'd swung the other way, resigning myself to the near impossibility of my task. The thought that I might be close to something here was staggering.

"You're lying," I said. "You've never seen him."

"I see him all the time. I've killed with him."

My stomach twisted, and it had nothing to do with the Strigoi's proximity. *Don't think about Dimitri killing people. Don't think about Dimitri killing people.* I said the words over and over in my head, forcing myself to stay calm.

"If that's true," I hissed back, "then I've got a message for you to deliver to him. Tell him Rose Hathaway is looking for him."

"I'm not your errand boy," he said, glowering.

My stake slashed out, drawing blood, and he grimaced in pain. "You're anything I want you to be. Now go tell Dimitri what I told you. Rose Hathaway. Rose Hathaway is looking for him. Say it." I pressed the point to his neck. "Say my name so I know you'll remember."

"I'll remember it so I can kill you."

The stake pressed harder, spilling blood.

"Rose Hathaway," he said. He spit at me but missed.

Satisfied, I leaned back. Denis watched me expectantly, stake poised and ready.

"Now we kill him?"

I shook my head. "Now we let him go."

SEVENTEEN

CONVINCING THEM TO RELEASE A Strigoi—particularly when we had him trapped—wasn't easy. My questioning hadn't made sense to them either, but they'd gone along with it. Letting a Strigoi go? That was *really* crazy—even for the unpromised. They exchanged uneasy glances with one another, and I wondered if they'd disobey. In the end, my harshness and authority won out. They wanted me as their leader and put their faith in my actions—no matter how insane they seemed.

Of course, once we *did* let the Strigoi go, we had the new problem of making sure he actually went. At first, he started to attack again, and then, realizing he'd probably get overwhelmed, he finally skulked off. He gave us one last menacing look as he disappeared into the darkness. I didn't think being taken down by a group of teenagers had done a lot for his self-esteem. He gave me in particular a look of hatred, and I shuddered at the idea of him knowing my name. There was nothing to be done about it now; I could only hope my plan had a chance of working.

Denis and the others got over me letting the Strigoi go once we made a few other kills that week. We fell into a routine, investigating clubs and dangerous parts of town, relying on my senses to tell us when danger was near. It was funny to me how much the group soon began to rely on my leadership. They claimed they wanted no part of the guardians' rules and authority, but they responded surprisingly well to me telling them what to do.

Well, more or less. Every once in a while, I'd see a bit of that unhinged recklessness. One of them would try to play hero, underestimate a Strigoi, or go in without the rest of us. Artur nearly ended up with a concussion that way. As the largest of all of us, he'd gotten a bit cocky and was therefore caught off guard when a Strigoi threw him into a wall. It had been a sobering moment for all of us. For a few agonizing moments, I'd feared Artur was dead—and that it was my fault as their leader. One of Sydney's Alchemists had come—though I'd made sure not to be around, lest Abe find me—and had treated Artur. The guy said Artur would be fine with some bed rest, meaning he had to stop hunting for a while. It was hard for him to do—and I had to yell at him when he tried to follow us one night, reminding him of all their friends who had died before because of such stupidity.

Out in the human world, dhampirs tended to run on human schedules. Now I put myself on a nocturnal schedule, just like I'd been on at the Academy. The others followed suit, except for Tamara, since she had a day job. I didn't want to be asleep during the time Strigoi prowled the streets. I had called Sydney

each time we left a kill, and word had to be getting around in the Strigoi community that someone was doing a lot of damage. And if the Strigoi we'd released had carried my message, some of those Strigoi could specifically come looking for me.

As days passed, our kills dropped a little, making me think the Strigoi were indeed being cautious now. I couldn't decide if that was a good or bad thing, but I urged the others to be extra careful. They were beginning to revere me as a goddess, but I took no satisfaction in their adoration. My heart still ached from all that had happened with Lissa and Dimitri. I wrapped myself up in my task, trying only to think of working the Strigoi community to get closer to Dimitri. But when we weren't out hunting Strigoi, I had a lot of downtime with nothing to do.

And so I kept visiting Lissa.

I'd known there were a lot of kids—like Mia—who lived at the Royal Court because their parents had jobs there. I didn't quite realize how many there were, though. Avery naturally knew them all, and to no one's surprise (at least not mine), most of them were spoiled and rich.

The rest of Lissa's visit had been a series of other functions and formal parties. The more she listened to royal Moroi talk business, the more it irritated her. She saw the same abuses of power she'd noted before, the same unfair way of distributing guardians like they were property. The controversial issue of whether Moroi should learn to fight alongside the guardians was also still a hot topic. Most of the people Lissa ran into at Court were of the old-school mentality: Let guardians fight and Moroi stay protected. After seeing the results of that policy—and the successes that had happened when people like Christian and I tried to change it—hearing the selfishness among the Moroi elite enraged Lissa.

She welcomed her escapes from these events whenever she could, anxious to run wild with Avery. Avery was always able to find people to hang out with and attend parties of a much different nature than Tatiana's. Stifling Court politics never came up at these parties, but there were still plenty of other things to drag Lissa's mood down.

In particular, Lissa felt her guilt, anger, and depression over me spiraling deeper and deeper. She'd seen enough of spirit's effects on her moods to recognize potential warning signs, though she hadn't been actively using spirit while on this trip. Regardless of the moods' cause, she still continued to do her best to seek distraction and drown her depression.

"Watch it," warned Avery one evening. She and Lissa were at a party the night before they had to fly back to the Academy. A lot of those who lived at Court had permanent housing, and this party was at the town house of some Szelsky who served as an aide on a committee Lissa didn't know. Lissa didn't really know their host either, but that didn't matter, save that his parents were out of town.

"Watch what?" asked Lissa, staring around the sights. The town house had a courtyard out back, lit up by tiki torches and strings of twinkling lights. There were drinks and food in full force, and some Moroi guy had a guitar out and was trying to impress girls with his musical skills—which were nonexistent. In fact, his music was so awful that he might have discovered a new way to kill

Strigoi. He was cute enough, though, that his admirers didn't seem to care what he played.

"This," said Avery, pointing at Lissa's martini. "Are you keeping track of how many of those you're taking down?"

"Not from what I can tell," said Adrian. He was sprawled on a lounge chair nearby, a drink in his own hand.

Lissa felt a bit amateur compared to them. While Avery was still her wild and flirtatious self, she didn't have the crazed or stupid air of someone completely trashed. Lissa didn't know how much the other girl had been drinking, but it was presumably a lot since Avery always had a drink in hand. Likewise, Adrian never seemed to be without a beverage, the effects of which mostly mellowed him out. Lissa supposed they had a lot more experience than her. She'd gone soft over the years.

"I'm fine," lied Lissa, who was watching her surroundings spin a little and seriously contemplating joining some girls dancing on a table across the courtyard.

Avery's lips quirked into a smile, though her eyes showed a bit of worry. "Sure. Just don't get sick or anything. That kind of thing gets around, and the last thing we need is everyone knowing that the Dragomir girl can't hold her liquor. Your family has a fierce reputation to maintain."

Lissa downed the drink. "Somehow, I doubt alcohol consumption is part of my family's illustrious ancestry."

Avery pushed Adrian over and lay down next to him on the lounge chair. "Hey, you'd be surprised. In ten years, this group will be your peers on the council. And you'll be trying to pass some resolution, and they'll be like, 'Remember that time she got trashed and threw up at that party?'"

Lissa and Adrian both laughed at that. Lissa didn't *think* she was going to get sick, but like everything else, she would worry about it later. The bright point of all this was that drinking was helping numb the memories of what had happened earlier in the day. Tatiana had introduced her to her future guardians: a seasoned guy named Grant and the "young lady," who was named Serena. They had been nice enough, but their parallels to Dimitri and me had been overwhelming. Taking them on had seemed like a betrayal to us, yet Lissa had simply nodded and thanked Tatiana.

Later, Lissa had learned that Serena had originally been lined up to be the guardian for a girl she'd known her entire life. The girl wasn't royal, but sometimes, depending on guardian numbers, even non-royals got assigned guardians—though never more than one. When positions for Lissa's protection opened up, however, Tatiana had pulled Serena from the job with her friend. Serena had smiled and told Lissa it didn't matter. Duty came first, she said, and she was happy to serve her. Yet Lissa felt bad, knowing it had to have been hard on both girls—and terribly unfair. But there it was again: an unfair balance of power with no one to really keep it in line.

Leaving that encounter, Lissa had cursed her own meekness. If she hadn't had the courage to follow me, she thought, she should have at least put her foot down and demanded that Tatiana give her my mother instead. Then Serena could have gone back to her friend, and there'd be one friendship still left intact in the world.

The martini simultaneously seemed to numb the pain and make her feel worse, which honestly made no sense to Lissa. *Whatever,* she thought. And when she caught a glimpse of a server passing by, she waved him over to order more.

"Hey, can I—Ambrose?"

She stared in surprise at the guy standing before her. If there'd been a swimsuit calendar for hottest dhampir guys, this one would have been the cover model (aside from Dimitri—but then, I was biased). This guy's name was Ambrose, and she and I had met him on our trip there together. He had deeply tanned skin and well-formed muscles underneath his gray button-down shirt. He was a particular oddity at Court, a dhampir who'd rejected guardian service and performed all sorts of tasks here, like giving massages and—if rumor was true—having "romantic encounters" with the queen. That one still made me cringe, and I'd run into some pretty disgusting things in my life.

"Princess Dragomir," he said, flashing her one of his perfect white grins. "An unexpected surprise."

"How have you been?" she asked, genuinely happy to see him.

"Good, good. I have the best job in the world, after all. And you?"

"Great," she replied.

Ambrose paused, eyeing her. He didn't drop that gorgeous grin, but Lissa could tell he didn't agree with her. She could see the disapproval in his face. Avery accusing her of drinking too much was one thing. But some pretty dhampir servant? Unacceptable. Lissa's demeanor grew cold, and she held out her glass.

"I need another martini," she said, her voice as haughty as that of any perfect royal.

He sensed the change in her, and his friendly smile turned to one of polite indifference. "Right away." He gave her a small bow and headed off to the bar.

"Jeez," said Avery, watching admiringly as he walked away. "Why didn't you introduce us to your friend?"

"He's not my friend," snapped Lissa. "He's nobody."

"Agreed," said Adrian, putting an arm around Avery. "Why look elsewhere when you've got the best right here?" If I hadn't known any better, I'd have sworn there was a hint of legitimate jealousy underneath his jovial tone. "Didn't I go out of my way to bring you to breakfast with my aunt?"

Avery gave him a lazy smile. "That's a good start. You've still got a ways to go to impress me, Ivashkov." Her gaze drifted over Lissa's head and turned surprised. "Hey, Jailbait's here."

Mia, with Jill in tow, came striding through the garden, indifferent to the shocked looks she received. The two of them were clearly out of place.

"Hey," said Mia when she reached Lissa's group. "My dad just got called away, and I have to go with him. I've got to give Jill back."

"No problem," said Lissa automatically, though she clearly wasn't happy about Jill being there. Lissa still kept wondering if Christian had some special interest in her. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah, just business."

Mia made her farewells to everyone and left the party as quickly as she'd

come, rolling her eyes at the other royals' sneers and shock as she passed.

Lissa turned her attention to Jill, who had sat gingerly in a nearby chair and was staring around her in wonder. "How's it been? Did you have fun with Mia?"

Jill turned back to Lissa, face brightening. "Oh yeah. She's really great. She's done so much work with water. It's crazy! And she taught me a few fighting moves, too. I can throw a right hook . . . although not very hard."

Ambrose returned then with Lissa's drink. He gave it to her wordlessly and softened a bit when he saw Jill. "You want anything?"

She shook her head. "No, thanks."

Adrian was watching Jill carefully. "You okay here? Do you want me to take you back to guest housing?" Like before, his intentions weren't romantic in the least. He seemed to regard her as a little sister, which I thought was cute. I hadn't thought him capable of that kind of protective behavior.

She shook her head again. "It's okay. I don't want you to have to leave . . . unless . . ." Her expression grew worried. "Do you want me to go?"

"Nah," said Adrian. "It's nice to have someone responsible around in the midst of all this madness. You should get yourself some food, if you're hungry."

"You're so motherly," teased Avery, echoing my thoughts.

For whatever reason, Lissa took Adrian's "responsible" comment personally, like he was directly slamming her. I didn't think that was the case at all, but she wasn't really thinking all that clearly. Deciding she wanted some food herself, she got up and wandered over to the table in the courtyard's garden that had trays of appetizers on it. Well, it had earlier. Now the table was being used by the dancing girls Lissa had noticed before. Someone had cleared space by moving all the trays of food to the ground. Lissa leaned over and picked up a mini sandwich, watching the girls and wondering how they could find any sort of beat in that royal guy's horrible music.

One of the girls spotted Lissa and grinned. She extended a hand. "Hey, come on up."

Lissa had met her once but couldn't recall her name. Dancing suddenly seemed like a great idea. Lissa finished the sandwich and, drink in hand, allowed herself to be pulled up. This got a few cheers from people gathered around. Lissa discovered that the crappy music was irrelevant and found herself getting into it. Her and the other girls' moves varied from overtly sexual to mockeries of disco. It was all fun, and Lissa wondered if Avery would claim this would haunt her in ten years too.

After a while, she and the others actually attempted some synchronized moves. They started by swaying their arms in the air and then moved on to some chorus line kicks. Those kicks proved disastrous. A misstep—Lissa was wearing heels—suddenly sent her over the table's edge. She lost the drink and nearly collapsed before a pair of arms caught her and kept her upright. "My hero," she muttered. Then she got a good look at her savior's face. "Aaron?"

Lissa's ex-boyfriend—and the first guy she'd ever slept with—looked down at her with a smile and released her once he seemed certain she could stand. Blond-haired and blue-eyed, Aaron was handsome in a surfer kind of way. I couldn't help but wonder what would have happened if Mia had seen him.

She, Aaron, and Lissa had once been involved in a triangle worthy of any soap opera.

"What are you doing here? We thought you disappeared," Lissa said. Aaron had left the Academy a few months ago.

"I'm going to school out in New Hampshire," he replied. "We're here visiting family."

"Well, it's great to see you," said Lissa. Things hadn't ended well between them, but in her current state, she meant her words. She'd had enough booze to think it was great to see everyone at the party.

"You too," he said. "You look amazing."

His words struck her more than she would have expected, probably because everyone else here had implied that she looked trashed and irresponsible. And breakup or no, she couldn't help but recall how attractive she'd once found him. Honestly, she still found him attractive. She just didn't love him anymore.

"You should stay in touch," she said. "Let us know what's going on." For a moment, she wondered if she should have said that, in light of having a boyfriend. Then she dismissed her worries. There was nothing wrong with hanging out with other guys—particularly since Christian hadn't cared enough to come with her on this trip.

"I'd like that," Aaron said. There was something in his eyes she found pleasurably disconcerting. "I don't suppose, though, that I could get a goodbye kiss, seeing as I rescued you and all?"

The idea was preposterous—then, after a moment, Lissa laughed. What did it matter? Christian was the one she loved, and a kiss between friends would mean nothing. Looking up, she let Aaron lean down and cup her face. Their lips met, and there was no denying it: The kiss lasted a *bit* longer than a friendly one. When it ended, Lissa found herself smiling like a dazed schoolgirl—which, technically, she was.

"See you around," she said, heading back toward her friends.

Avery wore a chastising look, but it wasn't over Aaron and the kiss. "Are you crazy? You nearly broke your leg. You can't do that kind of thing."

"You're supposed to be the fun one," pointed out Lissa. "It wasn't a big deal."

"Fun isn't the same as stupid," Avery retorted, face serious. "You can't go do stupid shit like that. I think we should get you home."

"I'm fine," said Lissa. She stubbornly looked away from Avery and instead focused on some guys who were doing shots of tequila. They were having some sort of competition—and half of them looked ready to pass out.

"Define 'fine,'" said Adrian wryly. Yet he looked concerned too.

"I'm fine," Lissa repeated. Her gaze snapped back to Avery. "I didn't get hurt at all." She'd expected grief about Aaron and was surprised they hadn't given it to her—which made it even more surprising when it came from another source.

"You kissed that guy!" exclaimed Jill, leaning forward. Her face was aghast, and she displayed none of her usual reticence.

"It was nothing," said Lissa, who was irked to have Jill reprimanding her of all people. "Certainly none of *your* business."

"But you're with Christian! How could you do that to him?"

"Relax, Jailbait," said Avery. "A drunken kiss is nothing compared to a drunken fall. God knows I've kissed plenty of guys drunk."

"And yet, I remain unkissed tonight," mused Adrian, with a shake of his head.

"It doesn't matter." Jill was really worked up. She'd grown to like and respect Christian. "You cheated on him."

With those words, Jill might as well have practiced her right hook on Lissa. "I did not!" Lissa exclaimed. "Don't drag your crush on him into this and imagine things that aren't there."

"I didn't imagine that kiss," said Jill, flushing.

"That kiss is the least of our worries," sighed Avery. "I'm serious—just let it go for now, you guys. We'll talk in the morning."

"But—" began Jill.

"You heard her. Let it go," a new voice growled. Reed Lazar had appeared out of nowhere and was looming over Jill, face as hard and scary as ever.

Jill's eyes went wide. "I'm just telling the truth. . . ." I had to admire her courage here, considering her normally timid nature.

"You're pissing everyone off," said Reed, leaning closer and clenching his fists. "And you're pissing me off." I was pretty sure this was the most I'd ever heard him say. I tended to kind of think of him as a caveman, stringing three-word sentences together.

"Whoa." Adrian leapt up and rushed to Jill's side. "*You* need to let this go. What, are you going to start a fight with some girl?"

Reed turned his glare on Adrian. "Stay out of this."

"The hell I will! You're crazy."

If anyone had asked me to make up a list of people most likely to risk a fight in defense of a lady's honor, Adrian Ivashkov would have been low on that list. Yet there he stood, face hard and hand sitting protectively on Jill's shoulder. I was in awe. And impressed.

"Reed," cried Avery. She too had risen and now stood on Jill's other side. "She didn't mean anything. Back off."

The two siblings stood there, eyes locked in some kind of silent showdown. Avery wore the harshest look I'd ever seen on her, and at last, he glowered and stepped back. "Fine. Whatever."

The group stared in amazement as he walked abruptly away. The music was so loud that only a few of the partygoers had overhead the argument. They stopped and stared, and Avery looked embarrassed as she sank back in her chair. Adrian still stood by Jill. "What the hell was that?" Adrian demanded.

"I don't know," Avery admitted. "He gets weird and overprotective sometimes." She gave Jill an apologetic smile. "I'm really sorry."

Adrian shook his head. "I think it's time for us to go."

Even in her drunken state, Lissa had to agree. The confrontation with Reed had shocked her into soberness, and she was suddenly uneasily evaluating her actions tonight. The glittering lights and fancy cocktails of the party had lost their charm. The drunken antics of the other royals seemed clumsy and stupid. She had a feeling she might regret this party tomorrow.

Once back in my own head, I felt fear set in. Okay. Something was very wrong with Lissa, and no one else seemed to notice it—well, not to the extent they should have. Adrian and Avery did seem concerned, but I had the feeling they were blaming her behavior on the drinking. Lissa was still reminding me a lot of how she'd been when we'd first returned to St. Vladimir's, when spirit had been seizing her and messing with her mind. Except . . . I knew enough about myself now to realize that my anger and fixation on punishing Strigoi was being influenced by spirit's dark side too. That meant *I* was draining it away from her. It should have been leaving Lissa, not building up. So what was wrong with her? Where was this short-tempered, crazy, and jealous persona coming from? Was spirit's darkness simply growing in intensity so that it spread to both of us? Were we splitting it?

"Rose?"

"Huh?" I glanced up from where I'd been staring blankly at the TV. Denis was looking down at me, his cell phone in his hand.

"Tamara had to work late. She's ready to go now, but . . ."

He nodded toward the window. The sun was almost down, the sky purple, with only a little orange on the horizon. Tamara worked within walking distance, and while there probably wasn't any real danger, I didn't want her out alone after sunset. I stood up. "Come on, we'll go get her." To Lev and Artur I said, "You guys can stay here."

Denis and I walked the half-mile to the small office where Tamara worked. She did assorted clerical tasks, like filing and copying, and there'd apparently been some project that kept her there late tonight. We met her at the door and walked back to the apartment without incident, talking animatedly about our hunting plans for the evening. When we reached Tamara's building, I heard a strange wailing across the street. We all turned, and Denis chuckled.

"Good God, it's that crazy woman again," I muttered.

Tamara didn't live in a bad part of town but, as in any city, there were homeless people and panhandlers. The woman we watched was almost as ancient as Yeva, and she regularly walked up and down the street, muttering to herself. Today, she lay on her back on the sidewalk, making strange noises while waving her limbs like a turtle.

"Is she hurt?" I asked.

"Nope. Just crazy," said Denis. He and Tamara turned to go inside, but some soft part of me couldn't abandon her. I sighed.

"I'll be right in."

The street was quiet (aside from the old lady) and I cut across without fear of traffic. Reaching the woman, I held out my hand to help her out, trying not to think about how dirty hers was. Like Denis had said, she merely appeared to be in crazy mode today. She wasn't hurt; she'd apparently just decided to lie down. I shuddered. I tossed the word *crazy* around a lot when it came to Lissa and me, but *this* was truly crazy. I really, really hoped spirit never took us this far. The homeless lady looked surprised at the help but took my hand and began talking excitedly in Russian. When she tried to hug me in gratitude, I stepped back and held up my hands in the international "back off" signal.

She did indeed back off but continued chatting happily. She grabbed the sides of her long coat and held them out like a ball-room skirt and began

spinning around and singing. I laughed, surprised that in my grim world, this would cheer me up. I started to cross back over to Tamara's place. The old woman stopped dancing and began talking happily to me again.

"Sorry, I have to go," I told her. It didn't seem to register.

Then she froze mid-sentence. Her expression gave me warning only half a millisecond before my nausea did. In one fluid motion, I spun around to face what was behind me, pulling my stake out as I moved. There was a Strigoi there, tall and imposing, having sneaked up while I was distracted. Stupid, stupid. I'd refused to let Tamara walk home alone, but I'd never even considered danger right outside my—

"No . . ."

I wasn't sure if I said the word or thought it. It didn't matter. The only thing that mattered just then was what my eyes saw before me. Or, rather, what my eyes *thought* they saw. Because surely, surely, I had to be imagining this. It couldn't be real. Not after all this time.

Dimitri.

I knew him instantly, even though he'd . . . changed. I think in a crowd of a million people, I would have recognized him. The connection between us would allow nothing else. And after being deprived of him for so long, I drank in every feature. The dark, chin-length hair, worn loose tonight and curling slightly around his face. The familiar set of lips, quirked now in an amused yet chilling smile. He even wore the duster he always wore, the long leather coat that could have come straight out of a cowboy movie.

And then . . . there were the Strigoi features. His dark eyes—the eyes I loved—ringed in red. The pale, pale, death-white skin. In life, his complexion had been as tanned as mine, thanks to so much time outdoors. If he opened his mouth, I knew I'd see fangs.

My whole assessment took place in the blink of an eye. I'd reacted fast when I'd felt him—faster than he'd probably expected. I still had the element of surprise, my stake poised and ready. It was perfectly lined up with his heart. I could tell, then and there, that I could make the hit faster than he could defend. But . . .

The eyes. Oh God, the eyes.

Even with that sickening red ring around his pupils, his eyes still reminded me of the Dimitri I'd known. The look in his eyes—the soulless, malicious gleam—that was nothing like him. But there was just enough resemblance to stir my heart, to overwhelm my senses and feelings. My stake was ready. All I had to do was keep swinging to make the kill. I had momentum on my side. . . .

But I couldn't. I just needed a few more seconds, a few more seconds to drink him in before I killed him. And that's when he spoke.

"Roza." His voice had that same wonderful lowness, the same accent . . . it was all just colder. "You forgot my first lesson: Don't hesitate."

I just barely saw his fist striking out toward my head . . . and then I saw nothing at all.

EIGHTEEN

UNSURPRISINGLY, I WOKE UP WITH A HEADACHE.

For a few addled seconds, I had no idea what had happened or where I was. As drowsiness wore off, the events on the street came slamming back to me. I sat upright, all of my defenses kicking into action, despite the slight wooziness in my head. Time to figure out where I was now.

I sat up on an enormous bed in a darkened room. No—not just a room. More like a suite or a studio. I'd thought the hotel in Saint Petersburg was opulent, but this blew it away. The half of the studio I sat in contained the bed and usual bedroom accessories: a dresser, nightstands, etc. The other half looked like a living room area, with a couch and a television. Shelves were built into the walls, all of them filled with books. Off to my right was a short hall with a door at the end. Probably a bathroom. On my other side was a large picture window, tinted, as Moroi windows often were. This one had more tint than any I'd ever seen. It was almost solid black, nearly impossible to see through. Only the fact that I could differentiate the sky from the horizon—after a fair amount of squinting—let me know it was daytime out there.

I slid off the bed, my senses on high alert as I tried to assess my danger. My stomach felt fine; there were no Strigoi in the area. That didn't necessarily rule out some other person, however. I couldn't take anything for granted—doing so was what had gotten me in trouble on the street. There was no time to ponder that, though. Not quite yet. If I did, my resolve here was going to falter.

Sliding off the bed, I reached into my coat pocket for the stake. Gone, of course. I saw nothing else nearby that would pass as a weapon, meaning I'd have to rely on my own body to do my fighting. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught sight of a light switch on the wall. I flipped it on and froze, waiting to see what—or who—the overhead lights would unveil.

Nothing unusual. No one else. Immediately, I did the first obvious thing and checked the door. It was locked, as I'd expected, and the only way of opening it was a numeric keypad. Plus, it was heavy and made of what looked like steel. It reminded me of a fire door. There was no getting past it, so I turned back around to continue my exploration. It was actually kind of ironic. A lot of my classes had gone over detailed ways of checking out a place. I'd always hated those; I'd wanted to learn about fighting. Now it appeared those lessons that had seemed useless at the time had real purpose.

The light had brought the suite's objects into sharper relief. The bed was

covered in an ivory satin duvet, filled to maximum fluffiness with down. Creeping over to the living room, I saw that the TV was nice—really nice. Large-screen plasma. It looked brand-new. The couches were nice too, covered in matte green leather. It was an unusual color choice for leather, but it worked. All of the furniture in the place—tables, desk, dresser—was made of a smooth, polished black wood. In a corner of the living room, I saw a small refrigerator. Kneeling down, I opened it up to find bottled water and juice, assorted fruits, and bags of perfectly cut cheeses. On top of the refrigerator was more snack-type food: nuts, crackers, and some type of glazed pastry. My stomach growled at the sight of it, but no way was I going to eat anything in this place.

The bathroom was done in the same style as the rest of the studio. The shower and large Jacuzzi tub were made of black polished marble, and little soaps and shampoos lined the counter. A larger mirror hung over the sink, except . . . it wasn't actually hanging. It was embedded so tightly into the wall that there was absolutely no way it could be removed. The material was strange too. It looked more like reflective metal than glass.

At first I thought that was strange, until I raced back out to the main room and looked around. There was absolutely *nothing* here that could be turned into a weapon. The TV was too big to move or break, short of cracking the screen, which looked like it was made of some high-tech plastic. There was no glass in any of the tables. The shelves were embedded. The bottles in the refrigerator were all plastic. And the window . . .

I ran over to it, feeling along its edges. Like the mirror, it was fitted perfectly into the wall. There were no panes. It was one smooth piece. Squinting again, I finally got a detailed view of my outer surroundings and saw . . . nothing. The land appeared to be rolling plains, with only a few scattered trees. It reminded me of the wilderness I'd traveled while going to Baia. I was no longer in Novosibirsk, apparently. And peering down, I saw that I was fairly high up. Fourth floor, maybe. Whatever it was, it was too high to jump without breaking a limb. Still, I had to take some sort of action. I couldn't just sit here.

I picked up the desk's chair and slammed it into the window—and achieved little effect on either the chair or the glass. "Jesus Christ," I muttered. I tried three more times and still had no luck. It was like they were both made of steel. Maybe the glass was some kind of bulletproof industrial-strength stuff. And the chair . . . well, hell if I knew. It was all one piece of wood and showed no signs of splintering, even after what I'd just put it through. But since I'd spent my whole life doing things that weren't that reasonable, I kept trying to break the glass.

I was on my fifth try when my stomach warned me of a Strigoi's approach. Spinning around, I kept a hold of the chair and charged the door. It opened, and I slammed into the intruder, with the chair's legs pointing out.

It was Dimitri.

Those same conflicted feelings I'd felt on the street returned to me, love mingled with terror. This time, I pushed through the love, not flinching in my attack. Not that it did much good. Hitting him was like hitting the window. He shoved me back, and I staggered, still holding onto the chair. I kept my

balance and charged once more. This time, when we collided, he grabbed a hold of the chair and ripped it from my hands. He then tossed it into the wall, like it weighed nothing.

Without that meager weapon, it was back to relying on my own body's strength. I'd been doing it for the last couple of weeks with our Strigoi questioning; this should have been the same. Of course, I'd had four other people then as backup. And none of those Strigoi had been Dimitri. Even as a dhampir, he'd been hard to beat. Now he was just as skilled—only faster and stronger. He also knew all my moves, seeing as he'd taught them to me. It was almost impossible to surprise him.

But just like with the window, I couldn't stay inactive. I was trapped in a room—the fact that it was a big, luxurious room didn't matter—with a Strigoi. A Strigoi. That's what I had to keep telling myself. There was a Strigoi in here. Not Dimitri. Everything I'd told Denis and the others applied here. *Be smart. Be vigilant. Defend yourself.*

"Rose," he said, deflecting one of my kicks effortlessly. "You're wasting time. Stop."

Oh, that voice. Dimitri's voice. The voice I heard when I fell asleep at night, the voice that had once told me he loved me . . .

No! It's not him. Dimitri is gone. This is a monster.

Desperately, I tried to think of how I could win here. I even thought of the ghosts I'd summoned on the road. Mark had said I could do that in moments of wild emotion and that they'd fight for me. This was as wild as emotion could get, yet I couldn't seem to call them. I honestly had no clue how I'd done it before, and all the wishing in the world couldn't make it happen now. Damn. What good were terrifying powers if I couldn't use them to my advantage?

Instead, I pulled the DVD player off its shelf, cords ripping from the wall. It wasn't much of a weapon, but I was desperate now. I heard a strange, primal battle scream, and some distant part of me realized I was making it. Again, I ran at Dimitri, swinging the DVD player as hard as I could. It probably would have hurt a little—*if* it had hit him. It didn't. He intercepted it again, taking it from me, and throwing it down. It smashed to pieces on the floor. In the same motion, he grabbed a hold of my arms to stop me from hitting or reaching for something else. His grip was hard, like it could break my bones, but I kept struggling.

He tried reason again. "I'm not going to hurt you. Roza, please stop."

Roza. The old nickname. The name he'd first called me when we'd fallen prey to Victor's lust charm, both of us wrapped naked in each other's arms . . .

This isn't the Dimitri you knew.

My hands were incapacitated, so I struck out with my legs and feet as best I could. It didn't do much. Without full use of the rest of my body for balance, I had no force to throw into my kicks. For his part, he looked more annoyed than truly concerned or angry. With a loud sigh, he grabbed me by the shoulders and flipped me around, pressing me against the wall and immobilizing me with the full force of his body. I struggled a little but was as pinned as the Strigoi had been when the others and I had gone hunting. The universe had a sick sense of humor.

“Stop fighting me.” His breath was warm against my neck, his body right up against mine. I knew his mouth was only a couple inches away. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

I gave another fruitless shove. My breath was coming in ragged gasps, and my head injury throbbed. “You’ll have to understand if I have a hard time believing that.”

“If I wanted you dead, you’d be dead. Now, if you’re going to keep fighting, I’ll have to tie you up. If you stop, I’ll let you stay unrestrained.”

“Aren’t you afraid I’ll escape?”

“No.” His voice was perfectly calm, and chills ran down my spine. “I am not.”

We stood like that for almost a minute, deadlocked. My mind raced. It was true that he probably would have killed me already if that were his intent, yet that gave me no reason to believe I was even remotely safe. Nonetheless, we were at a draw in this fight. Okay, *draw* wasn’t entirely accurate. *I* was at a draw. He was toying with me. My head was throbbing where his blow had landed, and this pointless fighting would only take a further toll. I had to regain my strength in order to find a way to escape—if I lived that long. I also needed to stop thinking about how close our bodies were. After our months of being so careful not to touch, this much contact was heady.

I relaxed in his hold. “Okay.”

He hesitated before letting me go, probably wondering if he could trust me. The whole moment reminded me of when we’d been together in the little cabin on the periphery of the Academy’s grounds. I’d been raging and upset, brimming with spirit’s darkness. Dimitri had held me down then, too, and talked me out of that horrible state. We had kissed, then his hands had lifted my shirt, and—no, no. Not here. I couldn’t think about that here.

Dimitri finally eased up, releasing me from the wall. I turned around, and all my instincts wanted to lash out and attack him again. Sternly, I reminded myself to bide my time so that I could gain more strength and information. Even though he’d let me go, he hadn’t moved away. We were only a foot apart. Against my better judgment, I found myself taking him in again, like I had on the street. How could he be the same and yet so different? I tried my best not to focus on the similarities—his hair, the difference in our heights, the shape of his face. Instead, I concentrated on the Strigoi features, the red in his eyes and pallor of his skin.

I was so fixated on my task that it took me a moment to realize he wasn’t saying anything either. He was studying me intently, like his eyes could look right through me. I shivered. It almost—*almost!*—seemed as though I captivated him the same way he captivated me. That was impossible, though. Strigoi didn’t possess those kinds of emotions, and besides, the thought of him still having any affection for me was probably just wishful thinking on my part. His face had always been hard to read, and now it was overlaid with a mask of cunning and coldness that made it truly impossible to know what was on his mind.

“Why did you come here?” he asked at last.

“Because you hit me on the head and dragged me here.” If I was going to die, I was going to go in true Rose style.

The old Dimitri would have cracked a smile or given an exasperated sigh. This one remained impassive. “That’s not what I meant, and you know it. Why are you *here*?” His voice was low and dangerous. I’d thought Abe was scary, but there was no competition at all. Even Zmey would have backed off.

“In Siberia? I came to find you.”

“I came here to get away from you.”

I was so shocked that I said something utterly ridiculous.

“Why? Because I might kill you?”

The look he gave me showed that he thought that was indeed a ridiculous thing to say. “No. So we wouldn’t be in *this* situation. Now we are, and the choice is inevitable.”

I wasn’t entirely sure what *this* situation was. “Well, you can let me go if you want to avoid it.”

He stepped away and walked toward the living room without looking back at me. I was tempted to try to do a sneak attack on him, but something told me I’d probably only make it about four feet before getting backhanded. He sat down in one of the luxurious leather armchairs, folding his six-foot-seven frame up as gracefully as he’d always done. God, why did he have to be so contradictory? He had the old Dimitri’s habits mixed with those of a monster. I stayed where I was, huddled against the wall.

“Not possible anymore. Not after seeing you now . . .” Again, he studied me. It felt strange. Part of me responded with excitement to the intensity of his gaze, loving the way he surveyed my body from head to toe. The other part of me felt dirty, like slime or muck was oozing over my skin as he studied me. “You’re still as beautiful as I remember, Roza. Not that I should have expected anything different.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. I’d never really had a conversation with a Strigoi, short of trading a few insults and threats in the midst of a fight. The nearest I’d come was when I’d been held captive by Isaiah. I actually had been tied up then, and most of the talking had been about him killing me. This . . . well, it wasn’t like that, but it was still definitely creepy. I crossed my arms over my chest and backed up against the wall. It was the closest I could come to some semblance of a defense.

He tilted his head, watching me carefully. A shadow fell across his face in such a way that it made the red in his eyes hard to see. Instead, they looked dark. Just like they used to, endless and wonderful, filled with love and bravery . . .

“You can sit down,” he said.

“I’m fine over here.”

“Is there anything else you want?”

“For you to let me go?”

For a moment, I thought I saw a bit of that old wryness in his face, the kind he’d get when I made jokes. Studying him, I decided I’d imagined it.

“No, Roza. I meant, do you need anything here? Different food? Books? Entertainment?”

I stared incredulously. “You make it sound like some sort of luxury hotel!”

“It is, to a certain extent. I can speak to Galina, and she’ll get you anything you wish.”

"Galina?"

Dimitri's lips turned up in a smile. Well, kind of. I think his thoughts were fond, but the smile conveyed none of that. It was chilling, dark, and full of secrets. Only my refusal to show weakness before him stopped me from cringing.

"Galina is my old instructor, back from when I was in school."

"She's Strigoi?"

"Yes. She was awakened several years ago, in a fight in Prague. She's relatively young for a Strigoi, but she's risen in power. All of this is hers." Dimitri gestured around us.

"And you live with her?" I asked, curious in spite of myself. I wondered exactly what kind of relationship they had, and to my surprise, I felt . . . jealous. Not that I had reason to. He was a Strigoi, beyond me now. And it wouldn't be the first time a teacher and student had gotten together. . . .

"I work for her. She was another reason I returned here when I was awakened. I knew she was Strigoi, and I wanted her guidance."

"And you wanted to get away from me. That was the other reason, right?"

His only answer was a nod of his head. No elaboration.

"Where are we? We're far from Novosibirsk, right?"

"Yes. Galina's estate is outside the city."

"How far?"

That smile twisted a little. "I know what you're doing, and I'm not going to give you that sort of information."

"Then what *are* you doing?" I demanded, all of my pent-up fear bursting out as anger. "Why are you holding me here? Kill me or let me go. And if you're going to just lock me up and torture me with mind games or whatever, then I really would rather you kill me."

"Brave words." He stood up and began pacing once more. "I almost believe you."

"They're true," I replied defiantly. "I came here to kill you. And if I can't do that, then I'd rather die."

"You failed, you know. On the street."

"Yeah. I kind of figured that out when I woke up here."

Dimitri made an abrupt turn and was suddenly standing in front of me, moving with that lightning-fast Strigoi speed. My Strigoi-nausea had never gone away, but the more time I spent with him, the more it faded to a low-level sort of background noise that I could more or less ignore.

"I'm a little disappointed. You're so good, Rose. So very, very good. You and your friends going around and taking down Strigoi caused quite a stir, you know. Some Strigoi were even afraid."

"But not you?"

"When I heard it was you . . . hmm." He turned thoughtful, eyes narrowing. "No. I was curious. Wary. If anyone could have killed me, it would have been you. But like I said, you hesitated. It was your ultimate test of my lessons, and you failed."

I kept my face blank. Inside, I was still beating myself up over that moment of weakness on the street. "I won't hesitate next time."

"There won't be a next time. And anyway, as disappointed as I am in you,

I'm still glad to be alive, of course."

"You aren't alive," I said through gritted teeth. God, he was so, so close to me again. Even with the changes to his face, the lean and muscled body was the same. "You're dead. Unnatural. You told me a long time ago you'd rather die than be like this. That's why I'm going to kill you."

"You're only saying that because you don't know any better. I didn't either back then."

"Look, I meant what I said. I'm not playing your game. If I can't get out of here, then just kill me, okay?"

Without warning, he reached out and ran his fingers along the side of my face. I gasped. His hand was ice cold, but the way he touched me . . . again, it was the same. Exactly the same as I remembered. How was this possible? So similar . . . yet so different. All of a sudden, another of his lessons came to mind, about how Strigoi could seem so, so like those you'd once known. It was why it was so easy to hesitate.

"Killing you . . . well, it's not that simple," he said. His voice dropped to a low whisper again, like a snake slithering against my skin. "There's a third option. I could awaken you."

I froze and stopped breathing altogether.

"No." It was the only thing I could say. My brain couldn't come up with anything more complex, nothing witty or clever. His words were too terrifying to even begin to ponder. "No."

"You don't know what it's like. It's . . . amazing. Transcendent. All your senses are alive; the world is more alive—"

"Yeah, but you're *dead*."

"Am I?"

He caught hold of my hand and placed it over his chest. In it, I could feel a steady beating. My eyes widened.

"My heart beats. I'm breathing."

"Yeah, but . . ." I tried desperately to think of everything I'd ever been taught about Strigoi. "It's not really being alive. It's . . . it's dark magic reanimating you. It's an illusion of life."

"It's better than life." Both of his hands moved up and cupped my face. His heartbeat might have been steady, but mine was racing. "It's like being a god, Rose. Strength. Speed. Able to perceive the world in ways you could never imagine. And . . . immortality. We could be together forever."

Once, that was all I'd ever wanted. And deep inside of me, some part still wished for that, wished desperately to be with him for all time. Yet . . . it wouldn't be the way I wanted it. It wouldn't be like it used to be. This would be something different. Something wrong. I swallowed.

"No . . ." I could barely hear my own voice, barely even form the words with him touching me like that. His fingertips were so light and gentle. "We can't be."

"We could." One of his fingers trailed down the side of my chin and came to rest on the artery in my neck. "I could do it quickly. There'd be no pain. It'd be done before you even knew it." He was probably right. If you were forced to become Strigoi, you had the blood drained from you. Then a Strigoi would usually cut himself and bring that blood to your lips. Somehow, I imagined I'd

pass out before I was even half-drained.

Together forever.

The world blurred a little. I don't know if it was because of my head trauma or the terror coursing through my body. I had envisioned a hundred scenarios when I set out after Dimitri. Becoming a Strigoi hadn't been one of them. Death—his or mine—had been the only thought consuming me, which had been stupid on my part.

My sluggish thoughts were interrupted when the door suddenly opened. Dimitri turned, shoving me away hard so that he stood protectively in front of me. Two people entered, shutting the door before I could even consider running for it. One of the newcomers was a Strigoi, a guy. The other was a human woman carrying a tray, her head bowed down.

I recognized the Strigoi immediately. It was hard not to; his face haunted my dreams. Blond hair, about the length of Dimitri's, hung over the side of a face that looked like he'd been in his early twenties when he turned. He had apparently seen Lissa and me when we were younger, but I had only seen him twice before. Once had been when I fought him on the Academy's grounds. The other time was when I'd encountered him in the cave that other Strigoi were using as a hangout.

He was the one who had bitten and turned Dimitri.

The guy barely spared me a glance and instead turned the full force of his anger on Dimitri. "What the hell is going on?" I had no trouble understanding him. He was American. "You're keeping some pet up here?"

"It's none of your concern, Nathan." Dimitri's voice was ice. Earlier, I'd thought he conveyed no emotion in his words. Now I realized it was just more difficult to detect. There was a clear challenge in his voice now, a warning for this other guy to back off. "Galina gave me permission."

Nathan's eyes drifted from Dimitri to me. His anger turned to shock. "*Her*?"

Dimitri shifted slightly, putting himself directly in front of me now. Some rebellious part wanted to snap that I didn't need a Strigoi's protection, except . . . well, I kind of did.

"She was at the school in Montana. . . . We fought. . . ." His lips curled back, showing his fangs. "I would have tasted her blood if that fire-using Moroi brat hadn't been around."

"This doesn't have anything to do with you," replied Dimitri.

Nathan's red eyes were wide and eager. "Are you kidding? She can lead us to the Dragomir girl! If we finish that line off, our names will be legendary. How long are you going to keep her?"

"Get out," growled Dimitri. "That's not a request."

Nathan pointed at me. "She's valuable. If you're going to keep her around as some blood whore plaything, at least share. Then, we'll get the information and finish her."

Dimitri took a step forward. "Get out of here. If you lay a hand on her, I will destroy you. I will rip your head off with my bare hands and watch it burn in the sun."

Nathan's fury grew. "Galina won't allow you to play house with this girl. Even you don't have that much favor."

"Don't make me tell you to leave again. I'm not in a patient mood today."

Nathan said nothing, and the two Strigoi stood there in a staring match. I knew Strigoi strength and power were partially related to age. Nathan had obviously been turned first. I didn't know by how much, but watching them, I got the feeling that Dimitri might be stronger or that it was at least a very, very even match. I could have sworn I saw a glimpse of fear in Nathan's red eyes, but he turned away before I could get a good look.

"This isn't over," he snapped, moving toward the door. "I'm talking to Galina."

He left, and for a moment, nobody moved or spoke. Then Dimitri looked at the human woman and said something in Russian. She'd been standing there, frozen.

Leaning over, she carefully placed her tray on the coffee table by the couch. She lifted a silver lid up, revealing a plate of pepperoni pizza loaded with cheese. Under any other circumstances, someone bringing me pizza in a Strigoi home would have been ludicrous and funny. Now, in the wake of Dimitri's threat to turn me Strigoi and Nathan's desire to use me to get to Lissa, nothing was funny. Even Rose Hathaway had limits when it came to making jokes. Next to the pizza was a huge brownie, thick with frosting. Food I loved, as Dimitri well knew.

"Lunch," he said. "Not poisoned."

Everything on the tray looked amazing, but I shook my head. "I'm not going to eat."

He arched an eyebrow. "Do you want something else?"

"I don't want anything else because I'm not going to eat anything *at all*. If you aren't going to kill me, then I'll do it myself." It was occurring to me that the suite's lack of weapons was probably for my own protection as much as theirs.

"By starving to death?" There was dark amusement in his eyes. "I'll awaken you long before then."

"Why aren't you just doing it now?"

"Because I'd rather wait for you to be willing." Man, he really did sound like Abe, except that breaking one's kneecaps seemed kind of soft-core in comparison.

"You're going to be waiting a long time," I said.

Dimitri laughed out loud then. His laughter had been rare as a dhampir, and hearing it had always thrilled me. Now it no longer had that rich warmth that had wrapped all around me. It was cold and menacing. "We'll see."

And before I could form a reply, he moved in front of me again. His hand snaked behind my neck, shoving me against him, and he tilted my face up, pressing his lips against mine. They were as cold as the rest of his skin . . . and yet there was something warm in there, too. Some voice in me screamed that this was sick and horrible . . . but at the same time, I lost track of the world around me as we kissed and could almost pretend we were back together in the cabin.

He pulled away as quickly as he'd moved in, leaving me gasping and wide-eyed. Casually, like nothing had happened, he gestured to the woman. "This is Inna." She looked up at the sound of her name, and I saw she was no older than me. "She works for Galina too and will check in on you. If you need

anything, let her know. She doesn't speak much English, but she'll figure it out." He said something else to her, and she meekly followed him to the door.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"I have things to do. Besides, you need time to think."

"There's nothing to think about." I forced as much defiance into my words as I could.

It must not have sounded very fierce, though, because all my speech earned me was one mocking smile before he left with Inna, leaving me alone in my luxurious prison.

NINETEEN

FOR SOMEONE WHO HAD PREACHED to Denis about impulse control, I wasn't setting a very good example. Once left alone in the suite, I continued trying everything possible to get out—emphasis on the "try" part.

Nathan had acted like keeping a prisoner was a rare thing, but from what I could tell, this place had been built to hold people in. The door and window remained impassible, no matter how hard I beat at them or threw objects against them. I didn't bother with the chair this time and instead used one of the living room's end tables, hoping it would carry some extra heft. It didn't. When that didn't work, I actually tried entering random codes into the door's keypad. Also useless.

Finally, exhausted, I collapsed onto the leather sofa and tried to assess my options. The process didn't take very long. I was trapped in a house full of Strigoi. Okay, I didn't know that for sure, but I knew there were at least three here, which was far too many for me. Dimitri had referred to this place as an "estate," which I didn't find comforting. Estates were *big*. The fact that I appeared to be on the fourth floor was proof of that. A big place meant that there could be lots of room for lots of vampires.

The one comfort I had was that Strigoi didn't cooperate very well. Finding large groups of them working together was rare. I'd observed it a couple of times—the attack on the Academy being one such occasion. They'd come then because the school's wards had dropped, and that had been a big enough incentive for the Strigoi to unite. Even when they did try to work together, the unions were usually short-lived. The friction I'd observed between Dimitri and Nathan was proof of that.

Dimitri.

I closed my eyes. Dimitri was the reason I was here. I'd come to free him from this state of living death and had promptly failed, just as he'd said. Now, it appeared I might be on the verge of joining him. *Yeah, good job, Rose.* I shivered, trying to imagine myself as one of them. Red rings around my pupils. Tanned skin gone pale. I couldn't picture it, and I supposed I'd never have to actually see myself if it happened. Strigoi cast no reflections. It would make doing my hair a real pain in the ass.

The scariest change of all would be within, the loss of my connection to my soul. Both Dimitri and Nathan had been cruel and antagonistic. Even if I hadn't been around to start the fight, it probably wouldn't have taken long for them to find some other reason to turn on each other. I was combative, but it was always driven by some passion for others. Strigoi fought because they

relished the bloodshed. I didn't want to be like that, seeking blood and violence because I enjoyed it.

I didn't want to believe that of Dimitri either, but his actions had already branded him as a Strigoi. I also knew what he had to have been eating this whole time to survive. Strigoi could go longer without blood than Moroi, but it had been over a month since he was turned. There was no question he had fed, and Strigoi almost always killed their victims to eat. I couldn't picture that of Dimitri . . . not the man I'd known.

I opened my eyes. The topic of feeding had brought my lunch to mind. Pizza and brownies. Two of the most perfect foods on the planet. The pizza had long gone cold during my escape efforts, but as I stared at the plate, both it and the brownie looked delicious. If the outside light was any indication, it hadn't been a full twenty-four hours since Dimitri had caught me, but it was getting pretty close. That was a long time to go without food, and I wanted to eat that pizza badly, cold or not. I didn't really want to starve to death.

Of course, I didn't want to become Strigoi either, but this situation was quickly running away from what I wanted. Starvation took a long time, and I suspected Dimitri was right: he'd turn me long before I had a chance to truly starve. I'd have to find some other way to die—God, not that I wanted that at all—and in the meantime, I decided I might as well keep up my strength on the feeble chance I might be able to escape.

Once the decision was made, I gobbled down the food in about three minutes. I had no idea who Strigoi hired to do their cooking—hell, Strigoi couldn't even eat regular food, unlike Moroi—but it was fantastic. Some wry part of me noted that I'd been given food that required no silverware. They really had thought of every possible way I might get my hands on a weapon. My mouth was full of my last giant bite of brownie when the door suddenly opened. Inna slipped deftly inside, the door shutting almost immediately.

"Son of a bitch!" Or at least I tried to say that through my mouthful of food. While I'd been debating whether to eat or not, I should have been staking out the door. Dimitri had said Inna would check in on me. I should have been waiting to overpower her. Instead, she'd gotten in while I wasn't paying attention. Once again, I'd slipped up.

Just like when she was around Dimitri and Nathan, Inna made very little eye contact. She held a pile of clothes in her arms and paused in front of me, holding them out. Uncertain, I took them from her and set them beside me on the couch.

"Um, thanks," I said.

Pointing at the empty tray, she actually glanced up at me shyly, a question in her brown eyes. Seeing her straight on, I was surprised at how pretty she was. She might even have been younger than me, and I wondered how she'd ended up being forced to work here. Understanding her query, I nodded.

"Thanks."

She picked the tray up and waited a moment. I wasn't sure why; then it occurred to me she must be waiting to see if I wanted anything else. I was pretty sure "the combination to the lock" wouldn't translate very well. I shrugged and waved her off, my mind spinning as I watched her approach the door. *I should wait for her to open the door and then jump her*, I thought.

Immediately, a gut reaction sprang up in me, hesitation at striking out at an innocent. Another thought squashed that one: *It's me or her*. I tensed.

Inna pressed herself close to the door as she punched in the combination, effectively blocking my view. Judging by how long she was punching in numbers, the code appeared to be pretty long. The door clicked open, and I braced myself to act. Then—I decided against it at the last moment. For all I knew, there could be an army of Strigoi out there. If I was going to use Inna to escape, I probably only had one opportunity. I needed to make it count. So, instead of leaping up, I shifted slightly so that I could see beyond her. She was just as fast as before, slipping out as soon as the door unlocked. But in that moment, I caught a glimpse of a short corridor and what looked like another heavy door.

Interesting. Double doors on my prison. If I did follow her, that would prevent me from making an immediate escape. She could simply wait by the other locked door, holding out until Strigoi backup showed up. That made things more difficult, but understanding the setup at least gave me a spark of hope. I just needed to figure out what to do with this information, provided I hadn't screwed myself by not acting now. For all I knew, Dimitri was about to walk in and turn me into a Strigoi.

I sighed. Dimitri, Dimitri, Dimitri.

Looking down, I took the time to actually see what she'd brought me. My current attire wasn't bothering me, but if I stayed here much longer, my jeans and T-shirt were going to get pretty gross.

Like Tamara, someone wanted to dress me up.

The clothes Inna had brought were all dresses and all in my size. A red silk sheath. A long-sleeved, form-fitting knit dress edged in satin. An empire-waist, ankle-length chiffon gown.

"Oh, great. I'm a doll."

Digging deeper into the stack, I discovered there were a few nightshirts and nightgowns tucked in there—as well as some underwear and bras. All of those were satin and silk. The most casual item in the whole lot was a forest-green sweaterdress, but even it was made of the softest cashmere. I held it up, trying to imagine myself making a daring escape in it. Nope. With a shake of my head, I heedlessly tossed all of the clothes onto the floor. Looked like I'd be wearing grungy clothes for a while.

I paced around after that, turning over futile escape plans that I'd already spun around in my head a million times. In walking, I realized how tired I was. Aside from the blackout when Dimitri had hit me, I hadn't slept in over a day. Deciding how to handle this was like deciding how to deal with the food. Let down my guard or not? I needed strength, but each concession I made put me more at risk.

At last, I gave in, and as I lay down on the massive bed, an idea suddenly occurred to me. I wasn't totally without help. If Adrian came to visit me in my sleep, I could tell him what had happened. True, I'd told him to stay away last time, but he'd never listened to me before. Why should this time be any different? I focused on him as hard as I could while I waited for sleep to come, as though my thoughts might act as some sort of bat signal and summon him.

It didn't work. There was no visit in my dreams, and when I woke up, I was

surprised at just how much that hurt me. Despite Adrian's infatuation with Avery, I couldn't help but recall how kind he'd been to Jill the last time I saw them. He was worried about Lissa, too, and he'd displayed none of his usual carefree bravado. He'd been serious and . . . well, sweet. A lump formed in my throat. Even if I had no romantic interest in him, I'd still treated him badly. I'd lost both our friendship and any chance of calling for help through him.

The soft rustling of paper snapped me from my musings and I jerked upright. Someone was in the living room, his back to me as he sat on the couch, and it took me only a moment to recognize who. Dimitri.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, climbing out of bed. In my groggy state, I hadn't even registered the nausea.

"Waiting for you to wake up," he said, not bothering to turn around. He was overly confident in my inability to inflict damage—as well he should have been.

"Sounds kind of boring."

I walked into the living room, moving myself far to the side of him and leaning against the wall. I crossed my arms over my chest, again taking comfort in that meaningless protective posture.

"Not so boring. I had company."

He glanced over at me and held up a book. A western. I think that shocked me almost as much as his altered appearance. There was something so . . . normal about it all. He'd loved western novels when he was a dhampir, and I'd often teased him about wanting to be a cowboy. Somehow, I'd imagined that hobby would go away when he turned. Irrationally hopeful, I studied his face as though I might see some radical change, like maybe he'd turned back to the way he'd been while I slept. Maybe the last month and a half had been a dream.

Nope. Red eyes and a hard expression looked back at me. My hopes shattered.

"You slept for a long time," he added. I dared a quick look at the window. Totally black. It was nighttime. Damn. I'd only wanted a two-hour power nap. "And you ate."

The amusement in his voice grated at me. "Yeah, well, I'm a sucker for pepperoni. What do you want?"

He placed a bookmark in the book and set it on the table. "To see you."

"Really? I thought your only goal was to make me one of the living dead."

He didn't acknowledge that, which was a bit frustrating. I hated feeling like what I had to say was being ignored. Instead, he tried to get me to sit down.

"Aren't you tired of always standing?"

"I just woke up. Besides, if I can spend an hour tossing furniture around, a little standing isn't that big a deal."

I didn't know why I was throwing out my usual witty quips. Honestly, considering the situation, I should have just ignored him. I should have stayed silent instead of playing into this game. I guess I kind of hoped that if I made the jokes I used to, I'd get some kind of response from the old Dimitri. I repressed a sigh. There I was again, forgetting Dimitri's own lessons. Strigoi were not the people they used to be.

"Sitting's not that big a deal either," he replied. "I told you before, I'm not

going to hurt you."

"'Hurt' is kind of a subjective term." Then, in a sudden decision to seem fearless, I walked over and sat in the armchair across from him. "Happy now?"

He tilted his head, and a few pieces of brown hair escaped from where he'd pulled it back in a small ponytail. "You still stay beautiful, even after sleeping and fighting." His eyes flicked down to the clothes I'd tossed on the floor. "You don't like any of them?"

"I'm not here to play dress-up with you. Designer clothes aren't going to suddenly get me on board with joining the Strigoi club."

He gave me a long, penetrating stare. "Why don't you trust me?"

I stared back, only my stare was one of disbelief. "How can you ask that? You abducted me. You kill innocent people to survive. You aren't the same."

"I'm better, I told you. And as for innocent . . ." He shrugged. "No one's really innocent. Besides, the world is made up of predators and prey. Those who are strong conquer those who are weak. It's part of the natural order. You used to be into that, if I remember correctly."

I looked away. Back at school, my favorite non-guardian class had been biology. I'd loved reading about animal behavior, about the survival of the fittest. Dimitri had been my alpha male, the strongest of all the other competitors.

"It's different," I said.

"But not in the way you think. Why should drinking blood be so strange to you? You've seen Moroi do it. You've *let* Moroi do it."

I flinched, not really wanting to dwell on how I used to let Lissa drink from me while we lived among humans. I certainly didn't want to think about the rush of endorphins that had come with that and how I'd nearly become an addict.

"They don't kill."

"They're missing out. It's incredible," he breathed. He closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them. "To drink the blood of another . . . to watch the life fade from them and feel it pour into you . . . it's the greatest experience in the world."

Listening to him talk about killing others increased my nausea. "It's sick and wrong."

It happened so fast that I didn't have any time to react. Dimitri leapt out and grabbed me, pulling me to him and spreading me out on the couch. With his arm still wrapped around me, he positioned himself so that he was half beside me and half on top. I was too stunned to move.

"No, it's not. And that's where you have to trust me. You'd love it. I want to be with you, Rose. *Really* be with you. We're free of the rules that others put on us. We can be together now—the strongest of the strong, taking everything we want. We can eventually be as strong as Galina. We could have a place just like this, all our own."

While his bare skin was still cold, the press of the rest of his body against mine was warm. The red in his eyes practically gleamed while this close, and as he spoke, I saw the fangs in his mouth. I was used to seeing fangs on Moroi, but on him . . . it was sickening. I briefly toyed with the idea of trying to break free but promptly dismissed it. If Dimitri wanted to hold me down, I would

stay down.

"I don't want any of this," I said.

"Don't you want me?" he asked with a wicked smile. "You wanted me once."

"No," I said, knowing I lied.

"What do you want then? To go back to the Academy? To serve Moroi who will throw you into danger without a second thought? If you wanted that kind of life, why did you come here?"

"I came to free you."

"I *am* free," he responded. "And if you'd really intended to kill me, you would have." He shifted slightly, resting his face close to my neck. "You couldn't."

"I messed up. It won't happen again."

"Suppose that were true. Suppose you were able to kill me now. Suppose you were even able to escape. What then? Will you go back home? Will you return to Lissa and let her continue bleeding spirit's darkness into you?"

"I don't know," I replied stiffly. And it was the truth. My plans had never gone past finding him.

"It will consume you, you know. As long as she continues to use her magic, no matter how far away you go, you'll always feel the side effects. At least as long as she's alive."

I stiffened in his arms and moved my face away. "What's that mean? Are you going to join Nathan and hunt her down?"

"What happens to her is no concern of mine," he said. "You are. If you were awakened, Lissa would no longer be a threat to you. You'd be free. The bond would break."

"And what would happen to her? She'd be left alone."

"Like I said, that's no concern of mine. Being with you is."

"Yeah? Well, I don't want to be with you."

He turned my face toward him so that we were looking at each other again. Once more, I had that weird feeling of being with Dimitri and not with Dimitri. Love and fear.

He narrowed his eyes. "I don't believe you."

"Believe what you want. I don't want you anymore."

His lips quirked into one of those scary, smirking smiles. "You're lying. I can tell. I've always been able to."

"It's the truth. I wanted you before. I don't want you now."If I kept saying it, it would be true.

He moved closer to me, and I froze. If I shifted even half an inch, our lips would touch. "My exterior . . . my power, yes, that's different. Better. But otherwise, I'm the same, Roza. My essence hasn't changed. The connection between us hasn't changed. You just can't see it yet."

"Everything's changed." With his lips so close, all I kept thinking about was that brief, passionate kiss he'd given me the last time he was here. No, no, no. *Don't think about that.*

"If I'm so different, then why don't I force you into an awakening? Why am I giving you the choice?"

A snappy retort was on my lips, but then it died. That was an excellent

question. Why *was* he giving me the choice? Strigoi didn't give their victims choices. They killed mercilessly and took what they wanted. If Dimitri truly wanted me to join him, then he should have turned me as soon as he had me. More than a day had passed, and he'd showered me with luxury. Why? If he turned me, I had no doubt that I'd become as twisted as him. It would make everything a lot simpler.

He continued when I remained silent. "And if I'm so different, then why did you kiss me back earlier?"

I still didn't know what to say, and it made his smile grow. "No answer. You know I'm right."

His lips suddenly found mine again. I made a small sound of protest and tried vainly to escape his embrace. He was too strong, and after a moment, I didn't want to escape. That same sensation as before flooded me. His lips were cold, but the kiss burned between us. Fire and ice. And he was right—I *did* kiss him back.

Desperately, that rational part of me screamed that this was wrong. Last time, he'd broken the kiss before too much could happen. Not this time. And as we continued kissing now, that rational voice in me grew smaller and smaller. The part of me that would always love Dimitri took over, exulting in the way his body felt against mine, the way he wound my hair around one of his hands, letting the fingers get tangled up. His other hand slid up the back of my shirt, cold against my warm skin. I pushed myself closer to him and felt the pressure of the kiss increase as his own desire picked up.

Then, in the midst of it all, my tongue lightly brushed against the sharp point of one of his fangs. It was like a bucket of cold water tossed upon me. With as much strength as I could muster, I jerked my head away, pulling out of the kiss. I could only guess that his guard had been momentarily down, allowing me that small escape.

My breathing was heavy, my whole body still wanting him. My mind, however, was the part of me in control—for now, at least. God, what had I been doing? *It's not the Dimitri you knew. It's not him*. I'd been kissing a monster. But my body wasn't so sure.

"No," I murmured, surprised by how pathetic and pleading I sounded. "No. We can't do this."

"Are you sure?" he asked. His hand was still in my hair, and he forcibly turned my head so that I was face-to-face with him again. "You didn't seem to mind. Everything can be just like it was before . . . like it was in the cabin . . . You certainly wanted it then. . . ."

The cabin . . .

"No," I repeated. "I don't want that."

He pressed his lips against my cheek and then made a surprisingly gentle trail of kisses down to my neck. Again, I felt my body's yearning for him, and I hated myself for the weakness.

"What about this?" he asked, his voice barely a whisper. "Do you want this?"

"Wh—"

I felt it. The sharp bite of teeth into my skin as he closed his mouth down on my neck. For half an instant, it was agonizing. Painful and horrible. And then,

just like that, the pain disappeared. A rush of bliss and joy poured through me. It was so sweet. I had never felt so wonderful in my life. It reminded me a little of how it had been when Lissa drank from me. That had been amazing, but this . . . this was ten times better. A hundred times better. The rush from a Strigoi bite was greater than that of a Moroi's. It was like being in love for the first time, filled with that all-consuming, joyous feeling.

When he pulled away, it felt like all the happiness and wonder in the world had vanished. He ran a hand over his mouth, and I stared at him wide-eyed. My initial instinct was to ask why he'd stopped, but then, slowly, I reached inside myself to fight past the blissful daze that his bite had sent me into.

"Why . . . what . . ." My words slurred a little. "You said it would be my choice. . . ."

"It still is," he said. His own eyes were wide, his breathing heavy too. He'd been just as affected as me. "I'm not doing this to awaken you, Roza. A bite like this won't turn you. This . . . well, this is just for fun. . . ."

Then, his mouth moved back to my neck to drink again, and I lost track of the world.

TWENTY

THE DAYS AFTER THAT WERE like a dream. In fact, I honestly can't say how many days even passed. Maybe it was one. Maybe it was a hundred.

I lost track of day and night too. My time was divided into Dimitri or not-Dimitri. He was my world. When he wasn't there, the moments were agony. I'd pass them as best I could, but they seemed to drag on forever. The TV was my best friend during those times. I'd lie on the couch for hours, only half following what was going on. In keeping with the rest of the suite's luxury, I had access to satellite television, which meant we were actually pulling in some American programming. Half the time, though, I wasn't sure that it really made a difference to me if the language was Russian or English.

Inna continued her periodic checks on me. She brought my meals and did my laundry—I was wearing the dresses now—and waited around in that silent way of hers to see if I needed anything else. I never did—at least not from her. I only needed Dimitri. Each time she left, some distant part of me remembered I was supposed to do something . . . follow her, that was it. I'd had some plan to check out the exit and use her as a way to escape, right? Now, that plan no longer held the appeal. It seemed like a lot of work.

And then, finally, Dimitri would visit, and the monotony would be broken. We'd lie together on my bed, wrapped in each other's arms. We never had sex, but we'd kiss and touch and lose ourselves in the wonder of each other's bodies—sometimes with very little clothing. After a while, I found it hard to believe I'd once been afraid of his new appearance. Sure, the eyes were a bit shocking, but he was still gorgeous . . . still unbelievably sexy. And after we'd talked and made out for a while—for hours, sometimes—I'd let him bite me. Then I'd get that rush . . . that wonderful, exquisite flood of chemicals that lifted me from all my problems. Whatever doubts I'd had about God's existence vanished in those moments because surely, surely I was touching God when I lost myself in that bite. *This* was heaven.

"Let me see your neck," he said one day.

We were lying together as usual. I was on my side, and he was snuggled up against my back, one arm draped around my waist. I rolled over and brushed my hair away from where it had fallen over my neck and cleavage. The dress I wore today was a navy halter sundress, made of some light, clingy material.

"Already?" I asked. He usually didn't bite me until the end of his visits. While part of me longed for that and waited in anticipation to feel that high again, I did kind of enjoy these moments beforehand. It was when the endorphins in my system were at their lowest, so I was able to manage some

sort of conversation. We would talk about fights we'd been in or the life he imagined for us when I was Strigoi. Nothing too sentimental—but nice nonetheless.

I braced myself for the bite now, arching up in anticipation. To my surprise, he didn't lean down and sink his teeth into me. He reached into his pocket and produced a necklace. It was either white gold or platinum—I didn't have the skill to tell which—and had three dark blue sapphires the size of quarters. He'd brought me a lot of jewelry this week, and I swore each piece was more beautiful than the last.

I stared in amazement at its beauty, at the way the blue stones glittered in the light. He placed the necklace against my skin and fastened it behind my neck. Running his fingers along the necklace's edges, he nodded in approval.

"Beautiful." His fingers drifted to one of the dress's straps. He slid his hand underneath it, sending a thrill through my skin. "It matches."

I smiled. In the old days, Dimitri had almost never gotten me gifts. He hadn't had the means, and I hadn't wanted them anyway. Now, I was continually dazzled by the presents he seemed to have at each visit.

"Where'd you get it?" I asked. The metal was cool against my flushed skin but nowhere near as cold as his fingers.

He smiled slyly. "I have my sources."

That chastising voice in my head that sometimes managed to penetrate through the haze I lived in noted that I was involved with some sort of vampire gangster. Its warnings were immediately squashed and sank back down into my dreamy cloud of existence. How could I be upset when the necklace was so beautiful? Something suddenly struck me as funny.

"You're just like Abe."

"Who?"

"This guy I met. Abe Mazur. He's some kind of mob boss . . . he kept following me."

Dimitri stiffened. "Abe Mazur was following you?"

I didn't like the dark look that had suddenly fallen over his features. "Yeah. So?"

"Why? What did he want with you?"

"I don't know. He kept wanting to know why I was in Russia but finally gave up and just wanted me to leave. I think somebody from home hired him to find me."

"I don't want you near Abe Mazur. He's dangerous." Dimitri was angry, and I hated that. A moment later, that fury faded, and he ran his fingers along my arm once more, pushing the strap down further. "Of course, people like that won't be an issue when you awaken."

Somewhere, in the back of my head, I wondered if Dimitri had the answers I wanted about Abe—about what Abe did. But talking about Abe had made Dimitri upset, and I cringed at that, hastily wanting to switch topics.

"What have you been doing today?" I asked, impressed at my ability to make normal small talk. Between the endorphins and him touching me, coherence was difficult.

"Errands for Galina. Dinner."

Dinner. A victim. I frowned. The feelings that inspired in me weren't of

repulsion so much as . . . jealousy.

"Do you drink from them . . . for fun?"

He ran his lips along my neck, teeth taunting my skin but not biting. I gasped and pressed closer to him.

"No, Roza. They're food; that's all. It's over quickly. You're the only one I take pleasure in."

I felt smug satisfaction in that, and that annoying mental voice pointed out that that was an incredibly sick and twisted view for me to have. I kind of hoped he would bite me soon. That usually shut the rational voice up.

I reached up and touched his face, then ran my hand through that wonderful, silky hair that I'd always loved. "You keep wanting to awaken me . . . but we won't be able to do this anymore. Strigoi don't drink from each other, do they?"

"No," he agreed. "But it'll be worth it. We can do so much more. . . ."

He left the "so much more" to my imagination, and a pleasant shiver ran through me. The kissing and blood taking were intoxicating, but there were some days that I did want, well . . . more. The memories of the one time we'd made love haunted me when we were this close together, and I often longed to do it again. For whatever reason, he never pushed for sex, no matter how passionate things became. I wasn't sure if he was using that as a lure for me to turn or if there was some incompatibility between a Strigoi and a dhampir. Could the living and the dead do that? Once, I would have found the thought of sex with one of them absolutely repulsive. Now . . . I just didn't think about the complications so much.

But although he didn't attempt sex, he would often taunt me with his caresses, touching my thighs and sternum and other dangerous places. Plus, he would remind me of what it had been like that one time, how amazing it had been, how our bodies had felt. . . . His talk of such things was more taunting than affectionate, though.

In my semi-clear moments, I honestly thought it was strange that I hadn't yet consented to becoming Strigoi. The endorphin fog made me agree to almost everything else he wanted. I'd fallen comfortably into dressing up for him, staying in my gilded prison, and accepting that he took a victim every couple days. Yet even in my most incoherent moments, even when I wanted him so badly, I couldn't agree to turning. There was some intrinsic part of me that refused to budge. Most of the time, he would shrug off my refusal, like it was a joke. But every once in a while when I declined, I'd see a spark of anger in his eyes. Those moments scared me.

"Here it comes," I teased. "The sales pitch. Eternal life. Invincible. Nothing to stand in our way."

"It's not a joke," he said. Oops. My flippancy had brought that hardness back to him. The desire and fondness that I'd just seen now fractured into a million pieces and blew away. The hands that had just stroked me suddenly grabbed my wrists and held me in place as he leaned down. "We can't stay like this forever. You can't stay here forever."

Whoa, that voice said. *Be careful. That doesn't sound good*. His grip hurt, and I often wondered if that was his intent or if he just couldn't help his violence.

When he finally released me, I wrapped my arm around his neck and tried

to kiss him. “Can’t we talk about that later?” Our lips met, fire blossoming between us and urgency coursing through my body. I could tell he had a matching desire, but a few seconds later, he broke away. The cold annoyance was still on his face.

“Come on,” he said, pulling away from me. “Let’s go.”

He stood up, and I stared stupidly. “Where are we going?”

“Outside.”

I sat up on the bed, dumbfounded. “Out . . . outside? But . . . that’s not allowed. We can’t.”

“We can do anything I want,” he snapped.

He extended his hand and helped me up. I followed him to the door. He was as skilled as Inna at blocking me from the keypad, not that it mattered now. There was no way I could ever remember that long of a sequence anymore.

The door clicked open, and he led me out. I stared in wonder, my dazed brain still trying to process this freedom. As I’d noticed that one day, the door led to a short corridor blocked by another door. It too was heavy and bore a keypad lock. Dimitri opened it, and I was willing to bet the two doors had different codes.

Taking my arm, he guided me through that door and into another hallway. Despite his firm hold, I couldn’t help but come to a standstill. Maybe I shouldn’t have been surprised at the opulence I suddenly faced. After all, I was living in this place’s penthouse suite. But the corridor leading out of my room had been stark and industrial-looking, and somehow I’d imagined the rest of the house to be equally institutional or prisonlike.

It wasn’t. Instead, I felt like I was in some old movie, the kind where people took tea in the parlor. The plush carpet was covered by a gold-patterned runner that stretched off in both directions of the hall. Antique-looking paintings dotted the walls, showing people from ages ago in elaborate clothing that made my dresses look cheap and ordinary. The whole place was illuminated by tiny chandeliers that were spaced along the ceiling every six feet or so. The teardrop-shaped crystals caught the light with their facets, scattering small flecks of rainbows on the walls. I stared, enchanted by the glitter and the color, which is probably why I failed to notice one other fixture in the hall.

“What are you doing?”

The harsh sound of Nathan’s voice jerked me from my crystal gazing. He’d been leaning against the wall opposite my door and straightened immediately upon seeing us. He had that same cruel expression on his face that was so characteristic of Strigoi, the one I occasionally saw on Dimitri, no matter how charming and kind he seemed sometimes.

Dimitri’s posture turned rigid and defensive. “I’m taking her for a walk.” He kind of sounded like he was talking about a dog, but my fear of Nathan trumped any offense I might take.

“That’s against the rules,” said Nathan. “Bad enough you’ve still got her here. Galina gave orders for you to keep her confined. We don’t need some rogue dhampir running around.”

Dimitri nodded toward me. “Does she look like she’s a threat?”

Nathan’s eyes flicked over at me. I wasn’t entirely sure what he saw. I didn’t

think I looked that different, but a small smirk crossed his lips that promptly disappeared when he turned back to Dimitri. “No, but I was ordered to babysit this door, and I’m not going to get in trouble for you taking a field trip.”

“I’ll deal with Galina. I’ll tell her I overpowered you.” Dimitri gave a fang-filled grin. “It shouldn’t be that hard for her to believe.”

The look Nathan gave Dimitri made me unconsciously step back until I hit the wall. “You’re so full of yourself. I didn’t awaken you so that you could act like you’re in charge around here. I did it so that we could use your strength and inside knowledge. You should be answering to *me*.”

Dimitri shrugged. Taking my hand, he started to turn away. “Not my fault if you’re not strong enough to make me do it.”

That was when Nathan lunged at Dimitri. Dimitri responded so quickly to the attack that I think he knew it would happen. He instantly released my hand, turned to catch hold of Nathan, and tossed the other Strigoi against the wall. Nathan immediately got up—it took more than that kind of hit to faze someone like him—but Dimitri was ready. He punched Nathan in the nose—once, twice, and then a third time, all in rapid succession. Nathan fell down, blood covering his face. Dimitri kicked him hard in the stomach and loomed over him.

“Don’t try it,” said Dimitri. “You’ll lose.” He wiped Nathan’s blood off of his hand and then laced his fingers through mine again. “I told you, I’ll deal with Galina. But thanks for your concern.”

Dimitri turned away again, apparently feeling there’d be no more attacks. There weren’t. But as I started to follow him, I cast a quick glance over my shoulder to where Nathan sat on the floor. His eyes shot daggers at Dimitri, and I was pretty sure I’d never seen a look of such pure hatred—at least until he turned his gaze on me. I felt cold all over and stumbled to keep up with Dimitri.

Nathan’s voice rang out behind us. “You’re not safe! Neither of you is. She’s lunch, Belikov. Lunch.”

Dimitri’s hand tightened on mine, and he picked up the pace. I could feel the fury radiating off of him and suddenly wasn’t sure whom I should be more afraid of: Nathan or Dimitri. Dimitri was a badass, alive or undead. In the past, I’d seen him attack foes without fear or hesitation. He’d always been magnificent, behaving just as bravely as I’d told his family. But in all those times, he’d always had a legitimate reason for fighting—usually self defense. His confrontation with Nathan just then had been about more, though. It had been an assertion of dominance and a chance to draw blood. Dimitri had seemed to enjoy it. What if he decided to turn on me like that? What if my constant refusal pushed him into torture, and he hurt me until I finally agreed?

“Nathan scares me,” I said, not wanting Dimitri to know that I feared him too. I felt weak and utterly defenseless, something that didn’t happen to me very often. Usually, I was ready to take on any challenge, no matter how desperate.

“He won’t touch you,” Dimitri said harshly. “You have nothing to worry about.”

We reached a set of stairs. After a few steps, it became clear that I wasn’t

going to be able to handle four flights. Aside from the drugged stupor his bites kept me in, the frequent blood loss was weakening me and taking its toll. Without saying a word, Dimitri swept me up in his arms and carried me downstairs effortlessly, gently setting me down when we reached the staircase's bottom.

The main floor of the estate had the same grand feel as the upstairs hall. The entryway had a huge vaulted ceiling with an elaborate chandelier that dwarfed the little ones I'd seen. Ornate double doors faced us, set with stained-glass windows. What also faced us was another Strigoi, a man sitting in a chair and apparently on guard duty. Near him was a panel set into the wall with buttons and flashing lights. A modern security system set amongst all this old-world charm. His posture stiffened as we approached, and at first, I thought it was a natural bodyguard instinct—until I saw his face. It was the Strigoi I'd tortured that first night in Novosibirsk, the one I'd dispatched to tell Dimitri I was looking for him. His lips curled back slightly as he met my eyes.

"Rose Hathaway," said the Strigoi. "I remember your name—just like you told me."

He said no more than that, but I tightened my grip on Dimitri's hand as we passed. The Strigoi's eyes never left me until we'd stepped outside and shut the door behind us.

"He wants to kill me," I told Dimitri.

"All Strigoi want to kill you," Dimitri returned.

"He really does. . . . I tortured him."

"I know. He's been in disgrace ever since then and lost some of his status here."

"That doesn't make me feel any better."

Dimitri seemed unconcerned. "Marlen is no one you need to worry about. You fighting him only proved to Galina that you're a good addition around here. He's beneath you."

I didn't find that overly reassuring. I was making too many personal Strigoi enemies—but then, it wasn't like I could really expect to be making Strigoi friends.

It was nighttime, of course. Dimitri wouldn't have taken me out otherwise. The foyer had made me think we were at the front of the house, but the extensive gardens that spread out around us made me wonder if we were in the back now. Or maybe the entire house was wrapped in this kind of greenery. We were surrounded in a hedge maze cut with beautiful detail. Within the maze were small courtyards, decorated with fountains or statues. And everywhere were flowers and more flowers. The air was heavy with their scent, and I realized that someone had gone to an awful lot of trouble to find night-blooming ones. The only type I immediately recognized was jasmine, its long, white-flowered vines climbing up trellises and statues in the maze.

We walked in silence for a bit, and I found myself lost in the romance of it all. The whole time Dimitri and I had been together at school, I'd been consumed with the fears of how we would juggle our relationship and our duty. A moment like this, walking in a garden on a spring night lit with stars, had seemed like a fantasy too crazy to even start to consider.

Even without the difficulty of stairs, too much walking grew exhausting in

my state. I came to a halt and sighed. “I’m tired,” I said.

Dimitri stopped too and helped me sit down. The grass was dry and tickly against my skin. I lay back against it, and a moment later, he joined me. I had an eerie moment of déjà vu, recalling the afternoon we’d made snow angels.

“This is amazing,” I said, staring up at the sky. It was clear, no clouds in sight. “What’s it like for you?”

“Hmm?”

“There’s enough light that I can see pretty clearly, but it’s still dim compared to day. Your eyes are better than mine. What do you see?”

“For me, it’s as bright as day.” When I didn’t respond, he added, “It could be like that for you, too.”

I tried to picture that. Would the shadows seem as mysterious? Would the moon and stars shine so brightly? “I don’t know. I kind of like the darkness.”

“Only because you don’t know any better.”

I sighed. “So you keep telling me.”

He turned toward me and pushed the hair away from my face. “Rose, this is driving me crazy. I’m tired of this waiting. I want us to be together. Don’t you like this? What we have? It could be even better.” His words sounded romantic, but not the tone.

I did like this. I loved the haze I lived in, the haze in which all worries disappeared. I loved being close to him, loved the way he kissed me and told me he wanted me. . . .

“Why?” I asked.

“Why what?” He sounded puzzled, something I hadn’t heard yet in a Strigoi.

“Why do you want me?” I had no idea why I even asked that. He apparently didn’t know either.

“Why wouldn’t I want you?”

He spoke in such an obvious way, like it was the stupidest question in the world. It probably was, I realized, and yet . . . I’d somehow been expecting another answer.

Just then, my stomach twisted. With all the time I’d spent with Dimitri, I really had managed to push the Strigoi nausea off my radar. The presence of other Strigoi increased it, though. I’d felt it around Nathan, and I felt it now. I sat up, and Dimitri did too, almost at the same time. He’d likely been alerted by his superior hearing.

A dark shape loomed over us, blotting out the stars. It was a woman, and Dimitri shot up. I stayed where I was, on the ground.

She was strikingly beautiful, in a hard and terrible way. Her build was similar to mine, indicating she hadn’t been a Moroi when turned. Isaiah, the Strigoi who’d captured me, had been very old, and power had radiated from him. This woman hadn’t been around nearly so long, but I could sense that she was older than Dimitri and much stronger.

She said something in Russian to him, and her voice was as cold as her beauty. Dimitri answered back, his tone confident yet polite. I heard Nathan’s name mentioned a couple of times as they spoke. Dimitri reached down and helped me up, and I felt embarrassed at how often I needed his assistance, when I used to almost be a match for him.

“Rose,” he said, “this is Galina. She’s the one who has been kind enough to

let you stay."

Galina's face didn't look so kind. It was devoid of all emotion, and I felt like my entire soul was exposed to her. While I was uncertain of a lot of things around here, I'd picked up enough to realize that my continual residence here was a rare and fragile thing. I swallowed.

"*Spasibo*," I said. I didn't know how to tell her it was nice to meet her—and honestly, I wasn't sure if it was—but I figured a simple thank-you was good enough. If she'd been his former instructor and trained at a normal Academy, she probably knew English and was faking it like Yeva. I had no clue why she'd do that, but if you could snap a teen dhampir's neck, you were entitled to do whatever you wanted.

Galina's expression—or lack thereof—didn't change with my thanks, and she turned her attention back to Dimitri. They conversed over me, and Dimitri gestured to me a couple of times. I recognized the word for *strong*.

Finally, Galina issued something that sounded final and left us without any sort of goodbye. Neither Dimitri nor I moved until I felt the nausea dissipate.

"Come on," he said. "We should get back."

We walked back through the maze, though I had no idea how he knew where to go. It was funny. When I'd first arrived, my dream had been to get outside and escape. Now that I was here . . . well, it didn't seem that important. Galina's anger did.

"What did she say?" I asked.

"She doesn't like that you're still here. She wants me to awaken you or kill you."

"Oh. Um, what are you going to do?"

He stayed silent for a few seconds. "I'll wait a little longer and then . . . I will make the choice for you."

He didn't specify which choice he'd be making, and I almost began my earlier pleas to die before becoming Strigoi. But suddenly, instead, I said, "How long?"

"Not long, Roza. You need to choose. And make the right choice."

"Which is?"

He held up his hands. "All of this. A life together."

We'd emerged from the maze. I stared at the house—which was crazy enormous when viewed from the outside—and at the beautiful gardens around us. It was like something from a dream. Beyond that, endless countryside rolled away, eventually becoming lost in the darkness and blending into the black sky—except for one tiny part that had a soft purple glow on the horizon. I frowned, studying it, then turned my attention back to Dimitri.

"And what then? Then I work for Galina too?"

"For a while."

"How long is a while?"

We came to a stop outside the house. Dimitri looked down into my eyes, his face alight with a look that made me take a step back.

"Until we kill her, Rose. Until we kill her and take all of this for ourselves."

TWENTY-ONE

DIMITRI DIDN'T ELABORATE. I WAS too startled by his words and the rest of the night's events to even know how to begin to address them. He took me back inside, past the Strigoi on guard duty, and upstairs to my suite. Nathan was no longer outside.

For a few brief moments, that nagging voice in my head spoke loudly enough to break through my addled thoughts. If I had no guard in the hall and Inna returned soon, I had a very good chance of threatening her enough to get out of here. Admittedly, that would mean I'd have to deal with a house of God only knew how many Strigoi, but my escape odds were better in the house than in this room.

Then, almost as soon as those thoughts appeared, they vanished. Dimitri snaked his arm around me and pulled me to him. It had been chilly outside, and even if his body was cold, his clothes and jacket provided some warmth. I snuggled closer to him as his hands ran all over me. I thought he was going to bite me, but it was our mouths that met, hard and furious. I wrapped my fingers in his hair, trying to pull him closer to me. Meanwhile, his fingers were running against my bare leg, pushing my skirt up almost to my hip. Anticipation and eagerness lit every part of my body. I had dreamed about the cabin for so long, remembering it with so much longing. I'd never expected anything like that to happen again, but now it could, and I was astonished at how badly I wanted it.

My hands moved down to his shirt, undoing all the buttons so that I could touch his chest. His skin still felt like ice, a startling contrast to the burning within me. He moved his lips from mine, down to my neck and shoulder, pushing down the dress's strap as he covered my flesh with hungry kisses. His hand was still on the side of my bare hip, and I frantically tried to pull his shirt off altogether.

Suddenly, with a surprising abruptness, he jerked away and shoved me down. At first, I thought it was just more of the foreplay between us, until I realized he was purposely pushing me away.

"No," he said, voice hard. "Not yet. Not until you're awakened."

"Why?" I asked desperately. I couldn't think of anything except him touching me—and, well, another bite. "Why does it matter? Is there . . . is there a reason we can't?" Until I'd come here, sex with a Strigoi had never occurred to me…maybe it just wasn't possible.

He leaned toward me, putting his lips near my ear. "No, but it'll be so much better if you're awakened. Let me do it . . . let me do it, and then we can do

anything we want. . . .”

It was a bargaining chip, I realized vaguely. He wanted me—it was written all over him—but he was using the lure of sex to get me to give in. And honestly? I was this close to accepting. My body was overriding my mind—nearly.

“No,” I whimpered. “I . . . I’m scared. . . .”

That dangerous look softened, and while he didn’t exactly look like the Dimitri from before, there was something a little less Strigoi about him. “Rose, do you think I’d do anything that would hurt you?” Somewhere, hadn’t there been a discussion about how my options were to turn or die? The latter seemed like it might hurt, but I didn’t mention that just now.

“The bite . . . the turning would hurt. . . .”

“I told you: It’ll be just like what we’ve already done. You’ll enjoy it. It won’t hurt, I swear it.”

I looked away. Damn it. Why couldn’t he still be sinister and scary? It was so much easier to put my foot down and resist. Even in the heat of passion, I was able to resist. But somehow . . . seeing him like this, calm and reasonable . . . well, it was too close to the Dimitri I’d loved. And *that* was hard to turn away from. For the first time, it made turning Strigoi seem . . . not so bad.

“I don’t know,” I said lamely.

He released me and sat up, frustration filling his features. It was almost a relief. “Galina’s patience is running out. So is mine.”

“You said we still have time. . . . I just need to think more. . . .” How long could I use that excuse? The narrowing of his eyes told me not much longer.

“I have to go,” he said harshly. There would be no more touching or kissing, I could tell. “I need to deal with some things.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, both confused and afraid. I didn’t know which Dimitri I wanted. The terrifying one, the sensual one, or the almost—but still not quite—gentle one.

He said nothing. Without any other warning, he leaned down and bit into the tender skin of my throat. Whatever feeble escape strategies I had were gone. I closed my eyes, nearly falling over, and only his arm wrapped firmly around me kept me upright. Just like when we kissed, his mouth was warm against my flesh, and the feel of his tongue and teeth sent electricity through me.

And like that, it was over. He pulled away, licking his lips as he still continued to hold onto me. The fog was back. The world was wonderful and happy and I was without any cares. Whatever he’d been worrying about with Nathan and Galina meant nothing to me. The fear I’d felt moments ago . . . my disappointment over sex . . . my confusion—I didn’t have time to worry about any of that, not when life was so beautiful and I loved Dimitri so much. I smiled up at him and tried to hug him again, but he was already leading me to the couch.

“I’ll see you later.” In a flash, he was at the door, which saddened me. I wanted him to stay. Stay forever. “Remember, I want you—and I would never let anything bad happen to you. I’ll protect you. But . . . I can’t wait much longer.”

With that, he left. His words made me smile more broadly. Dimitri wanted

me. Vaguely, I recalled asking him outside *why* he wanted me. Why on earth had I asked? What answer had I wanted? Why did it matter? He wanted me. That was what counted.

That thought and the wonderful endorphin rush enveloped me as I lay on the couch, and I felt drowsiness overtaking me. Walking over to the bed seemed like too much work, so I stayed where I was and just let sleep come.

And, unexpectedly, I found myself in one of Adrian's dreams.

I'd pretty much given up on him. After my first desperate attempts at escape in the suite, I'd finally convinced myself that Adrian wasn't coming back, that I'd sent him away for good. Yet here he was, standing right in front of me—or, well, at least his dream version was. Often we were in the woods or a garden, but today we stood where we'd first met, on the porch of an Idaho ski lodge. Sun shone down, and mountains soared off to the side of us.

I grinned broadly. "Adrian!"

I didn't think I'd ever seen him look as surprised as he did just then. Considering how mean I usually was to him, I could understand his feelings.

"Hello, Rose," he said. His voice sounded uncertain, like he was worried I might be playing a trick on him.

"You look good today," I told him. It was true. He wore dark jeans and a printed button-down shirt in shades of navy and turquoise that looked fantastic with his dark green eyes. Those eyes, however, looked weary. Worn. That was a little odd. In these dreams, he could shape the world and even our appearances to what he wanted, with only a little effort. He could have looked perfect but instead appeared to be reflecting real-world fatigue.

"So do you." His voice was still wary, as he eyed me from head to toe. I was still in the clingy sundress, my hair down and loose, the sapphires around my neck. "That looks like something I'd normally dress you in. Are you asleep in that?"

"Yup." I smoothed down the dress's skirt, thinking how pretty it looked. I wondered if Dimitri had liked it. He hadn't said so specifically, but he had kept telling me I was beautiful. "I didn't think you'd come back."

"I didn't think I would either."

I looked back up at him. He wasn't like his usual self at all. "Are you trying to figure out where I am again?"

"No, I don't care about that anymore." He sighed. "The only thing I care about is that you aren't *here*. You have to come back, Rose."

I crossed my arms and flounced onto the porch's railing. "Adrian, I'm not ready for anything romant—"

"Not for me," he exclaimed. "For her. You have to come back for Lissa. That's why I'm here."

"Lissa . . ."

My waking self was pumped full of endorphins, and it carried over here. I tried to remember why I should be so worried about Lissa.

Adrian took a step forward and studied me carefully. "Yeah, you know, Lissa? Your best friend? The one you're bonded to and sworn to protect?"

I swung my legs back and forth. "I never made any vows."

"What the hell's the matter with you?"

I didn't like his agitated tone. It was ruining my good mood. "What's the

matter with *you*?"

"You aren't acting like yourself. Your aura . . ." He frowned, unable to continue.

I laughed. "Oh yes. Here it comes. The magical, mystical aura. Let me guess. It's black, right?"

"No . . . it . . ." He continued scrutinizing me for several heavy seconds. "I can barely get a fix on it. It's all over the place. What's going on, Rose? What's happening in the waking world?"

"Nothing's happening," I said. "Nothing except me being happy for the first time in my life. Why are you acting weird all of a sudden? You used to be fun. Figures the first time I'm finally having a good time, you go all boring and strange."

He knelt down in front of me, no trace of humor anywhere. "There's something wrong with you. I can't tell what—"

"I told you, I'm fine. Why do you have to keep coming and trying to ruin things for me?" True, I'd desperately wanted him to come a little while ago, but now . . . well, that wasn't so important. I had a good thing with Dimitri here, if only I could figure out how to solve all the not-so-good parts.

"I told you, I'm not here for me. I'm here for Lissa." He looked up at me, wide-eyed and earnest. "Rose, I am *begging* you to come home. Lissa needs you. I don't know what's wrong, and I don't know how to help her. No one else does either. I think . . . I think only you can. Maybe being apart is what's hurting her. Maybe that's what's wrong with you now, why you're acting so weird. Come home. Please. We'll heal both of you. We'll all figure it out together. She's acting so strange. She's reckless and doesn't care about anything."

I shook my head. "Being away isn't what's wrong with me. Probably not what's wrong with her, either. If she's really worried about spirit, she should go back on her meds."

"She's *not* worried; that's the problem. Damn it." He stood up and began pacing. "What's wrong with you two? Why can't either of you see there's something the matter?"

"Maybe it's not us," I said. "Maybe it's you imagining things."

Adrian turned back toward me and looked me over again. "No. It's not me."

I didn't like any of this—not his tone, expression, or words. I'd been excited to see him, but now I resented him ruining my good mood. I didn't want to think about any of this. It was too hard.

"Look," I said. "I was happy to see you tonight but not anymore, not if you're going to sit and accuse me and make demands."

"I'm not trying to do that." His voice was gentle—the anger was gone. "The last thing I want is to make you unhappy. I care about you. I care about Lissa, too. I want you both to be happy and live your lives like you want . . . but not when you're both heading down destructive paths."

He almost made sense. Almost seemed reasonable and sincere. I shook my head.

"Stay out of it. I'm where I want to be, and I'm not coming back. Lissa's on her own." I jumped off the rail. The world swirled a little, and I stumbled. Adrian caught my hand, and I jerked away. "I'm fine."

"You are not. Jesus Christ. I'd swear you're drunk, except . . . the aura's still not right for that. What *is* it?" He ran his hands through his dark hair. It was his typical sign of agitation.

"I'm done here," I said, trying to be as polite as possible. Why on earth had I wanted to see him again? It had seemed so important when I first arrived. "Send me back, please."

He opened his mouth to say something, then froze a few moments. "What's on your neck?"

He reached forward, and addled or no, I managed to dodge pretty efficiently. I had no idea what he saw on my neck, and I had no interest in finding out. "Don't touch me."

"Rose, that looks like—"

"Send me back, Adrian!" So much for my politeness.

"Rose, let me help—"

"*Send. Me. Back!*"

I shouted the words, and then, for the first time, I managed to pull myself out of Adrian's dream. I left sleep altogether and woke up on the couch. The room was still and silent, the only sound my rapid breathing. I felt all tangled up inside. Usually, so fresh from a bite, I would be floating and gleeful. Yet, the encounter with Adrian had left part of me troubled and sad.

Standing up, I managed to make my way to the bathroom. I flicked on the light and winced. It hadn't been very bright in the other room. Once my eyes adjusted, I leaned toward the mirror and pushed my hair out of the way. I gasped at what I saw. There were bruises all over my neck, as well as signs of fresher wounds. Around where Dimitri had just bitten me, I could see dried blood.

I looked . . . like a blood whore.

How had I never noticed this before? I wet a washcloth and scrubbed at my neck, trying to get the blood off. I rubbed and rubbed until the skin turned pink. Was that it? Were there more? That looked like the worst of it. I wondered how much Adrian had seen. My hair had been down, and I was pretty sure most of it had covered my neck.

A rebellious thought came to my head. What did it matter if Adrian saw or not? He didn't understand. There was no way he could even come close. I was with Dimitri. Yeah, he was different . . . but not *that* much different. And I was sure I could find a way to make this work without becoming a Strigoi. I just didn't know how yet.

I tried to reassure myself over and over, but those bruises kept staring back at me.

I left the bathroom and returned to the couch. I turned on the TV without really watching, and after a while, the happy fog rolled over me again. I soon tuned out the TV and returned to sleep. This time, my dreams were my own.

It took a while for Dimitri to come again. And by "a while," I mean almost an entire day. I was getting twitchy by that point, both because I missed him and because I missed the bite. He usually visited twice a day, so this was the longest I'd gone without the endorphins. Needing something to do, I preoccupied myself with making myself as beautiful as possible.

I sorted through the dresses in my closet, choosing a long ivory silk one that had purple flowers delicately painted into the fabric. It fit like a glove. I wanted to wear my hair up, but after looking at the bruises again, I decided to wear it down. I'd been provided with a curling iron and makeup recently, so I worked my hair over carefully, turning the ends up in perfect little curls. Once made up, I stared happily at my reflection, certain Dimitri would be happy too. All I needed now was to put on some of the exquisite jewelry he'd given me. But when I turned to leave, I caught a glimpse of my back from the side and saw I'd missed fastening a clasp. I reached around to do it but couldn't get a hold of it. It was in that perfect spot just out of my reach.

"Damn," I muttered, still grappling with the hook. The flaw in my perfection.

Just then, I heard the door open in the other room, followed by the telltale sound of a tray being set on the coffee table. A stroke of luck.

"Inna!" I called, walking out of the bathroom. "I need you to—"

Nausea rolled through me, and as I stepped into the living room, I saw that Dimitri wasn't the source. Nathan was.

My jaw dropped open. Inna stood near him, waiting patiently by the tray, eyes downcast as always. I immediately ignored her and then looked back at Nathan. Presumably, he was still on guard duty, but that had never actually included him coming inside. For the first time in a while, some of my battle instincts kicked in, assessing escape options. My fear urged me to back away, but that would trap me in the bathroom. Best to stay where I was. Even if I couldn't leave the room, this gave me the most space to maneuver.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, surprised at how calm I sounded.

"Taking care of a problem."

I didn't really need any pointers to figure out the subtext here. I was the problem.

Again, I fought the urge to back up. "I've never done anything to you." It was faulty logic to a Strigoi. None of their victims *ever* did anything to them.

"You exist," he said. "You're taking up space here, wasting everyone's time. You know how to find her—the Dragomir girl—yet you'll offer nothing remotely useful until Belikov gets off his ass and awakens you. And in the meantime, Galina forces me to waste time watching you and keeps promoting *him* because he's convinced her that you're going to be some amazing asset to us."

It was an interesting set of grievances. "So . . . um, what are you going to do?"

In a flash, he stood in front of me. Seeing him so close triggered that memory in my mind's eye—him biting Dimitri and starting all of this. A spark of anger kindled in me but didn't do much in the way of development. "I'm getting the information one way or another," he hissed. "Tell me where she is."

"You know where she is. She's at the school." There was nothing useful in giving up that news. He knew she was there. He knew where the school was.

The look he gave me showed he was not happy about me providing knowledge he already had. Reaching out, he gripped my hair and jerked my head painfully back. Wearing my hair down maybe hadn't been so useful after

all. “Where is she *going*? She won’t stay there forever. Is she going to college? The Royal Court? They must have made plans for her.”

“I don’t know what they are. I’ve been away for a while.”

“I don’t believe you,” he snarled. “She’s too valuable. Her future would have been planned out a while ago.”

“If it is, no one’s shared it with me. I left too soon.”

I shrugged by way of answer. Rage filled his eyes, and I swear, they grew redder.

“You’re bonded! You know. Tell me now, and I’ll kill you quickly. If you don’t, I’ll awaken you to get the information, and *then* I’ll kill you. I’ll light you up like a bonfire.”

“You . . . you’d kill me once I was one of you?” Foolish question. Strigoi felt no loyalty to each other.

“Yes. It’ll destroy him, and once Galina sees how unhinged he is, *I* will return to my original place by her side—especially after I stamp out the Dragomir line.”

“The hell you will.”

He smiled and touched my face, running his fingers along my neck and the bruises all over it. “Oh, I will. It really will make things easier if you just tell me now. You’ll die in ecstasy rather than being burned alive. We’ll both enjoy it.” He wrapped his hand delicately around my throat. “You’re definitely a problem, but you *are* beautiful—especially your throat. I can see why he wants you. . . .”

Warring emotions played within me. Logically, I knew this was Nathan—Nathan, whom I hated for having turned Dimitri in the first place. Yet my body’s need for Strigoi endorphins was raising its head too, and it barely mattered that it was Nathan. What mattered was that his teeth were only a breath away from my neck, promising that sweet, sweet delirium.

And while one hand held my throat, the other ran down my waist, down to the curve of my hip. There had been a sultry edge to Nathan’s voice, like he wanted to do more than just bite me. And after so many sexually charged encounters with Dimitri—encounters that never resulted in anything—my body almost didn’t care who touched it. I could close my eyes, and it wouldn’t matter whose teeth bit into me or whose hands peeled off my clothes. Only the next fix would matter. I could close my eyes and pretend it was Dimitri, lost in it all as Nathan’s lips brushed my skin. . . .

Except, as some small reasonable part of me recalled, Nathan didn’t just want sex and blood. He eventually wanted to kill me.

Which was kind of ironic. I’d been dead set—no pun intended—on killing myself when I got here, lest I become a Strigoi. Nathan was offering me that now. Even if he turned me first, he planned on killing me immediately afterward. Either way, I wouldn’t have to spend eternity as a Strigoi. I should have welcomed this.

But just then, as my body’s addiction screamed for his bite and that bliss, I realized something with startling clarity: *I didn’t want to die*. Maybe it was because I’d gone almost a day without a bite, but something small and rebellious woke up in me. I would *not* let him do this to me. I would not let him go after Dimitri. And I sure as hell wasn’t going to let him hunt down

Lissa.

Pushing through that endorphin cloud that still hung around me, I summoned up as much willpower as I could. I dug deep, remembering my years of training and all the lessons Dimitri had given me. It was hard to access those memories, and I only touched a few. Still, enough came to spur me to action. I lunged forward and punched Nathan.

And accomplished nothing.

He didn't budge. Hell, I don't even know if he felt it. The surprise on his face promptly turned to mirth, and he laughed in that horrible way Strigoi did—cruelly and without any real joy. Then, with the greatest of ease, he slapped me and knocked me across the room. Dimitri had done nearly the same thing when I'd arrived and attacked him. Only I hadn't flown quite as far or had so miniscule an effect on him.

I slammed into the back of the couch, and good God, did it hurt. A wave of dizziness washed over me, and I realized the idiocy of fighting someone vastly stronger than me when I'd been losing blood all week. I managed to straighten up and desperately sought my next course of action. Nathan, for his part, seemed in no hurry to respond to my attack. In fact, he was still laughing.

Glancing around, I latched onto a truly pitiful course of action. Inna stood near me. Moving with a speed that was painfully slow—but better than I expected myself to manage—I reached for her and wrapped my arm around her neck. She yelped in surprise, and I jerked her harder against me.

"Get out of here," I said to Nathan. "Get out of here, or I'll kill her."

He stopped laughing, stared at me for a moment, and then laughed even harder. "Are you serious? Do you honestly think I couldn't stop you if I wanted? And do you honestly think I *care*? Go ahead. Kill her. There are dozens more just like her."

Yeah, that really shouldn't have been a surprise either, but even I was a bit taken aback by how easily he could throw away a faithful servant's life. Okay. Time to go to Plan B. Or maybe it was Plan J? Frankly, I was losing track, and none of them were very good anyway—

"Ow!"

Inna suddenly elbowed me in the stomach. I released her in my surprise. She spun around with a strangled scream and socked me in the face. The blow wasn't as hard as Nathan's had been, but it still knocked me over. I tried to catch a hold of something—anything—as I fell but failed. I hit the floor, my back slamming against the door. I expected her to come right back at me, but instead, she darted across the room and—God help us all—threw herself into a defensive posture in front of Nathan.

Before I could fully process the weirdness of her trying to protect someone who was willing to let her die, the door suddenly opened. "Ow!" I said again, as it hit me and pushed me aside.

Dimitri swiftly entered. He looked from face to face, and I had no doubt mine showed signs of both Nathan's and Inna's attacks. Dimitri's fists clenched, and he turned toward Nathan. It reminded me of their scuffle in the hallway, all rage and malice and bloodlust. I cringed, bracing myself for another horrible confrontation.

"Don't," warned Nathan, face smug. "You know what Galina said. Touch me

and you're out of here."

Dimitri strode across the room and came to stand in front of Nathan, knocking Inna aside like a rag doll. "It'll be worth facing her wrath, particularly when I tell her you attacked first. Rose certainly bears the marks of it."

"You wouldn't." He pointed at Inna, who was sitting dazed on the floor from where Dimitri had knocked her over. Despite my own injuries, I began crawling over to her. I had to know if she was all right. "She'll tell the truth."

Now Dimitri looked smug. "You really think Galina will believe a human? No. When I tell her how you attacked me and Rose out of jealousy, she'll let me off. The fact that you'll be so easily defeated will be proof of your weakness. I'll slice your head off and get Rose's stake from the vault. With your last breath, you can watch her drive it through your heart."

Holy crap. That was a little worse than Nathan threatening to burn me—wait.

My stake?

Nathan's face still bore haughty arrogance—at least to me. But I think Dimitri must have seen something that satisfied him, something that made him think he'd gotten the upper hand. He visibly relaxed, his smirk growing larger. "Twice," Dimitri said softly. "Twice I've let you go. Next time . . . next time, you're gone."

I reached Inna and gently held out my hand. "Are you okay?" I murmured.

With a look of hate, she recoiled and scooted away. Nathan's eyes fell on me, and he began backing toward the door.

"No," he said. "Twice I've let her live. Next time *she's* gone. I'm the one in control here, not you."

Nathan opened the door and Inna stood up, stumbling after him. I stared, mouth agape at the events that had just taken place. I didn't know which of them I found more disturbing. Looking up at Dimitri, I grappled with what to ask him first. What were we going to do? Why had Inna defended Nathan? Why had Dimitri let him go? None of those defiant questions came to my lips, though.

Instead, I burst into tears.

TWENTY-TWO

I DIDN'T CRY VERY OFTEN. And I hated it when I did. The last time I'd done it around Dimitri, his arms had immediately encircled me. This time, all I got was a look of coldness and anger.

"This is your fault!" he yelled, fists clenched.

I cringed backward, eyes wide. "But he . . . he attacked me . . ."

"Yes. And Inna. A human! You let a human attack you." He couldn't keep the sneer from his voice. "You are weak. You are incapable of defending yourself—*all because you refuse to be awakened!*"

His voice was terrifying, and the look he gave me . . . well, it scared me almost more than Nathan had. Reaching forward, he jerked me up to my feet.

"If you had just been killed, it would have been your own fault," he said. His fingers dug into my wrist as he shook me. "You have the chance for immortality, for incredible strength! And you're too blind and stubborn to see it."

I swallowed back more tears and rubbed my eyes with the back of my free hand. No doubt I was ruining the makeup I'd so painstakingly put on. My heart was ready to explode out of my chest, I was so afraid. I expected rage and threats from Nathan—but not Dimitri.

You've forgotten he's a Strigoi, something whispered in my mind.

I'd gone long enough without a bite and had enough adrenaline kicking me to alertness that my nagging voice was speaking more loudly than it had in a very long time. Dimitri said I was weak because I wasn't Strigoi, but there was more to it than that. I was weak and had been subdued by Nathan and Inna because I was an addict, because I was living a life of blissful ignorance that was taking a toll on my body and my mind. The thought was startling, and I could barely hold onto it. My yearning for vampire endorphins flared up, and the two factions warred in my mind.

I had enough sense not to voice any of those thoughts. I tried for something that would pacify Dimitri instead. "I don't think I'd be stronger than Nathan, even if I was turn—awakened."

He ran a hand over my hair, his cold voice thoughtful. He seemed to be calming down, but his eyes were still angry and impatient. "Perhaps not initially, but your strength of body and will carries over with the change. He's not that much older than either of us—not enough to make a noticeable difference, which is why he keeps backing down when we fight."

"Why do *you* keep backing down?"

I felt his body go rigid, and I realized my question might be read as a slam

against his prowess. I swallowed, my fear returning. He hadn't let go of my wrist, and it was starting to hurt.

"Because he's right about one thing," Dimitri said stiffly. "Killing him would bring Galina's wrath down on us. And that's not something I can afford. Yet."

"You said before that you . . . that we . . . had to kill her."

"Yes, and once we do, it'll be easy to seize control of her assets and organization."

"What is her organization exactly?" If I kept distracting him, the anger might go away. The monster might go away.

He shrugged. "All sorts of things. This wealth isn't bought without effort."

"Effort that's illegal and hurts humans?"

"Does it matter?"

I didn't bother with an answer. "But Galina used to be your teacher. Can you really kill her? And I don't mean physically . . . I mean, doesn't it bother you?"

He considered. "I told you before. It's all about strength and weakness. Prey and predator. If we can bring her down—and I have no doubts we can—then she's prey. End of story."

I shivered. It was so harsh, such a stark and scary way of viewing the world. Dimitri released my wrist just then, and a wave of relief ran through me. On shaky legs, I backed up and sat on the couch. For a moment, I feared he'd grab me again, but instead he sat down beside me.

"Why did Inna attack me? Why did she defend Nathan?"

"Because she loves him." Dimitri didn't bother hiding his disgust.

"But how . . . ?"

"Who knows? Part of it is that he's promised to awaken her once she's put in time here." Sydney's warnings came back to me, about why the Alchemists feared that humans would learn about vampires—because humans might want to turn too. "That's what most of the human servants are told."

"Told?"

"Most are unworthy. Or, more often than not, someone gets hungry and finishes the human off."

I was getting sick to my stomach, independent of Dimitri's proximity. "This is all a mess."

"It doesn't have to be." I didn't think he would shake me again, but there was a dangerous glint in his eyes. The monster was only a heartbeat away. "Time's running out. I've been lenient, Roza. Far more lenient than I would be with anyone else."

"Why? Why have you done it?" I wanted—needed—then to hear him say it was because he loved me and that because of that love, he could never force me into anything I didn't want. I needed to hear it so that I could blot out that terrifying, furious creature I'd seen a few minutes ago.

"Because I know how you think. And I know awakening you of your own free will would make you a more important ally. You're independent and strong-minded—that's what makes you valuable."

"An ally, huh?"

Not the woman he loved.

He shifted so that his face hovered over mine. "Didn't I tell you once I'd

always be there for you? I'm here. I'll protect you. We're going to be together. We're meant to be together. You know this." There was more fierceness in his voice than affection.

He kissed my lips, drawing me close. The usual heat flooded me, my body instantly responding to his. But even as my body did one thing, other thoughts were spinning through my mind. I had always thought we were meant to be together. And he had once told me he'd always be there for me. I'd always wanted that too—but I had wanted to be there for him in return. I wanted us to be equals, always watching each other's backs. Today hadn't been like that. I'd been defenseless. Weak. Never, never in my life had I been like that. Even in horrible, outmatched moments, I'd put up a decent fight. At the very least, I'd had the will to fight. Not now. I'd been terrified. I'd been ineffectual. I hadn't been able to do anything except sit there pathetically and wait for someone to rescue me. I'd let a *human* get the best of me.

Dimitri said me becoming Strigoi was the solution. For the last week, he'd said that over and over, and while I hadn't agreed to it, I hadn't been as repulsed as I once had been. Lately, it had become a thought floating around out there, a far-off way for us to be together. And I did want to be together, especially in moments like this, when we kissed and desire crackled around both of us.

But this time . . . the desire wasn't quite as intense as usual. It was still there, but I couldn't shake the image of how he'd just been. It occurred to me with startling clarity that I was making out with a Strigoi. And that was . . . weird.

Breathing heavy, Dimitri pulled away from my lips for a moment and stared at me. Even with that composed Strigoi expression, I could see that he wanted me—in a lot of ways. It was confusing. He was Dimitri and not Dimitri. Leaning back down, he kissed my cheek, then my chin, and then my neck. His mouth opened wider, and I started to feel the points of his fangs. . . .

"No," I blurted out.

He froze. "What did you say?" My heart started thumping again, as I braced myself for more rage.

"Um . . . no. Not this time."

He pulled back and looked at me, seeming both shocked and annoyed. When he didn't respond, I began to ramble.

"I don't feel good. . . . I'm hurt. I'm afraid to lose the blood, even though I want . . ." Dimitri always said I couldn't lie to him, but I had to try. I put on my best, most passionate and innocent face. "I want it . . . I want to feel the bite . . . but I want to rest first, get stronger . . ."

"Let me awaken you, and you'll be strong again."

"I know," I said, still keeping my voice slightly frantic. I looked away, hoping to increase the façade of confusion. Okay, with my life lately, faking confusion wasn't that hard. "And I'm starting to think . . ."

I heard a sharp intake of breath. "Starting to think what?"

I turned back to him, hoping I could convince him I was seriously considering turning. "I'm starting to think that I don't ever want to be weak again."

I could see it in his face. He believed me. But then, that last part hadn't been

a lie. I didn't want to be weak.

"Please . . . I just want to rest. I need to think about it a little more."

There it was, the moment this all weighed on. The truth was, I wasn't just lying to him. I was lying to myself. Because seriously? I wanted that bite. Badly. I'd already gone a long time without one, and my body was screaming for it. I needed the endorphins, needed them more than air or food. And yet, in only one day without them, I'd gained a tiny shard of clarity. The part of me that wanted nothing more than the joy of ignorant ecstasy didn't care about my mind growing clearer, yet I knew, deep inside, that I had to try for a little bit more, even if it meant depriving myself of what I most wanted.

After a lot of thought, Dimitri nodded and stood up. He'd read my words like I'd reached a turning point and was on the verge of accepting. "Rest, then," he said. "And we'll talk later. But Rose . . . we only have two days."

"Two days?"

"Until Galina's deadline. That's how long she gave us. Then I make the decision for you."

"You'll awaken me?" I wasn't entirely sure if death was on the table anymore.

"Yes. It'll be better for all of us if we don't reach that point." He got off the bed and stood up. He paused a moment and reached into his pocket. "Oh. I brought you this."

He handed me a bracelet encrusted with opals and tiny diamonds, almost like it was no big deal. The bracelet was dazzling, and each opal shone with a thousand colors. "Wow. It's . . . it's gorgeous." I slipped it on my wrist, yet somehow, gifts like this didn't mean as much anymore.

With a satisfied look, he leaned down and kissed me on the forehead. He headed for the door then and left me lying back against the couch, trying desperately to think of anything else except how I wished he would turn around and bite me.

The rest of the day was agonizing.

I'd always read about addicts, about how hard a time people had breaking away from alcohol or illegal drugs. I'd even once witnessed a feeder go kind of crazy when he was removed from service. He'd grown too old, and it was considered hazardous to his health to keep on giving blood to Moroi. I'd watched in amazement as he begged and pleaded to be allowed to stay, how he'd sworn he didn't mind the risk. Even though I'd known he had an addiction, I just couldn't understand why it would be so worth it for him to risk his life like that. Now I did.

In those hours that passed, I would have risked my life to be bitten again. That was actually kind of funny because if I did allow another bite, I *would* be risking my life. I had no doubt more of that cloudy thinking would lead to an acceptance of Dimitri's offer. But with each miserable, bite-deprived second that passed, my thoughts grew incrementally sharper. Oh, I was still a long way away from being free of the dreamy haze of vampire endorphins. When we'd been captured in Spokane, Eddie had been used as a Strigoi blood source, and it had taken him days to recover. Each bit of clarity now made me realize how important it was for me to stay bite free. Not that that knowledge made it

any easier on my body.

I had some serious problems here. It seemed like either way, I was destined to become a Strigoi. Dimitri wanted to turn me so that we could reign together as the vampiric equivalent of Bonnie and Clyde. Nathan wanted to turn me in the hopes of hunting down Lissa—and then kill me. Clearly, Dimitri's option was more appealing, but not by much. Not anymore.

Yesterday, I would have said becoming a Strigoi was something I wasn't going to worry about too much. Now, the harsh reality of what it truly meant hit me, and my old feelings returned. Suicide versus existence as a creature of evil. Of course, being a creature of evil meant I could be with Dimitri. . . .

Except it wasn't Dimitri. Was it? It was all so confusing. I again tried to remind myself of what he'd said long ago—that no matter how much a Strigoi seemed like the person I used to know, they weren't. Yet this Dimitri said he'd been wrong about that.

"It's the endorphins, Rose. They're like drugs . . ." I groaned and buried my face in my hands as I sat on the couch, the TV droning in the background. Lovely. I was talking to myself now.

Supposing I could break this hold Dimitri had over me and this addled state that kept making me think I'd misunderstood Strigoi . . . well, then what? I was back to the original dilemma. No weapons to fight Strigoi with. No weapons with which to kill myself. I was back at their mercy, but at least now I was closer to putting up a good fight. Sure, it would be a losing fight, but I felt that if I stayed off the endorphins a little longer, I'd at least be able to take down Inna. That had to count for something.

And there it was. Off the endorphins. Each time my mind ran through my options and hit a wall, I would spiral back to the physical reality in front of me. I wanted that high back. I wanted that haze of joy back. I needed it back, or surely, I would die. That would be what killed me and freed me from being a Strigoi. . . .

"Damn it!"

I stood up and began pacing around, hoping to distract myself. TV wasn't doing it; that was for sure. If I could just hold out a little longer, I could shake the drug from my system, I could figure out how to save myself and Lissa, and —

Lissa!

Without any debate, I dove into her. If I was in her body and mind, then maybe I wouldn't have to deal with mine for a while. My withdrawal would pass more quickly.

Lissa and her group had returned from the Royal Court a bit more grimly than they arrived. The cold light of morning had made Lissa feel incredibly idiotic about the party's events. Dancing on a table wasn't the worst thing in the world, but looking back over other parties she'd been to that weekend and her social life with Avery made her wonder what had gotten into her. Sometimes, she didn't even feel like herself. And the kiss with Aaron . . . well, that was an entirely different guilt-inducing matter altogether.

"Don't worry about it," Avery told her on the plane. "We all do stupid stuff when we're drunk."

"Not me," groaned Lissa. "This isn't like me." Despite this claim, Lissa had

nonetheless agreed to drink mimosas—champagne mixed with orange juice—on the ride back.

Avery smiled. "I don't have anything to compare it to. You seem okay to me. But then, you aren't trying to run off with a human or some non-royal guy."

Lissa smiled back, and her eyes went to Jill, sitting a little ahead of them on the plane. Adrian had spoken to the younger girl earlier, but she was busy with a book now, her biggest concern seeming to be to stay away from Reed. He sat with Simon again, and Lissa was a little surprised to see the guardian eyeing Jill suspiciously. Maybe Reed had told Simon that the younger girl was some kind of threat.

"You're worried about her?" asked Avery, following Lissa's gaze.

"It's not that. . . . I just can't shake the way she looked at me last night."

"She's young. I think she's easily shocked."

Lissa supposed that was true. Yet young or not, there had been something refreshingly clear and honest in the way Jill had called Lissa out. It reminded Lissa of something I might do. And Lissa couldn't rest easy knowing someone like that thought badly of her. Lissa stood up.

"I'll be right back," she told Avery. "I'm going to talk to her."

Jill was obviously astonished when Lissa sat beside her. The younger girl put a bookmark in what she was reading, and whatever she might be feeling, her smile for Lissa was genuine. "Hey."

"Hey," said Lissa. She hadn't had much of the mimosa yet and still controlled enough spirit to see Jill's aura. It was a rich teal blue, interspersed with purple and darker blue. Good, strong colors. "Look, I wanted to apologize for what happened last night . . . what I said . . ."

"Oh," said Jill flushing. "It's okay, really. I mean, things were kind of crazy, and I know you weren't thinking straight. At least, I don't think you were. I don't really know. I've never actually had a drink, so I can't say." Jill's nervousness always seemed to make her oscillate between rambling and silence.

"Yeah, well, I should have been thinking straight *before* I got in that situation. And I'm really sorry for what happened with Reed." Lissa lowered her voice. "No clue what happened there . . . but that wasn't right, what he did and said to you."

Both girls found themselves studying him. He was deep in a book, but suddenly, as though he could sense them watching, his gaze turned toward Jill and Lissa. He glared, and they immediately looked away.

"That definitely wasn't your fault," said Jill. "And, you know, Adrian was there and everything. So it turned out okay."

Lissa worked to keep a straight face. Adrian was sitting out of their view, but if he hadn't been, Lissa had a feeling Jill would have been gazing at him dreamily. Adrian was doing a good deal of gazing of his own at Avery lately, and Lissa could see Jill was never going to leave that little-sister role for him. Yet it seemed clear that Jill was developing a little bit of a crush. It was cute, and even though Lissa knew it was stupid on her part, she couldn't help feeling a bit of relief that Adrian was the object of Jill's affections and not Christian.

"Well, here's hoping for better choices," said Lissa. "And hoping no one

thinks too badly of me."

"I don't," said Jill. "And I'm sure Christian won't either."

Lissa frowned, confused for a moment. "Well . . . there's no point in stressing him out over it. It was my stupid mistake; I'll deal with it."

Now Jill frowned. She hesitated before speaking, that old nervousness returning. "But you have to. You have to tell him the truth, right?"

"It's no big deal," said Lissa, surprised at how defensive she suddenly felt. That unpredictable anger started to raise its head.

"But . . . you guys are in a serious relationship. . . . You have to always be honest, don't you? I mean, you can't lie to him."

Lissa rolled her eyes. "Jill, you haven't been in a serious relationship either, have you? Have you even gone on one date? I'm not lying to him. I'm just not telling him stuff that's going to freak him out for no reason. It's not the same."

"It is," argued Jill. I could tell how much it killed her to talk back to Lissa, but I admired her boldness. "He has a right to know."

Lissa sighed irritably and stood up. "Forget it. I thought we could have an adult conversation, but apparently not." The withering look she gave Jill made the girl flinch.

Still, back at the Academy, guilt plagued Lissa. Christian greeted her return happily, showering her with kisses and hugs. She firmly believed Jill had overreacted, yet each time Lissa looked at Christian, she kept thinking about that kiss with Aaron. Was it as wrong as Jill had implied? It had been casual and under the influence of alcohol. Lissa knew telling Christian would upset him, though, and she hated to bring that on. Avery, listening as Lissa deliberated, agreed that there was no need to worry about it. Yet, as I looked at her through Lissa's eyes, my impression was that Avery was more worried about what Lissa's emotional reaction would be if she and Christian had a blowout. The morals seemed beside the point; Avery wanted to protect Lissa.

It seemed like it was all going to blow over . . . until later in the day, when Lissa met up with Christian to walk to dinner. His face was a storm cloud as he approached Lissa in her dorm's lobby, his pale blue eyes looking like they could shoot lightning bolts.

"When were you going to tell me?" he demanded. His voice was loud, and several passing people turned in surprise.

Lissa hurried him to a corner, pitching her voice low. "What are you talking about?"

"You *know* what I'm talking about. You using your weekend getaway as a chance to hook up with other guys."

She stared at him for several heavy seconds. Then the truth hit. "Jill told you!"

"Yes. I had to drag it out of her. She showed up to practice with me and was on the verge of tears."

Uncharacteristic anger suddenly burned through Lissa. "She had no right!"

"*You* had no right. Do you honestly think you could do something like that —without ever letting me know?"

"Christian, it was a stupid drunk kiss, for God's sake. A joke because he saved me from falling off a table. It meant nothing."

Christian's face grew pensive, and Lissa thought for sure he was about to

agree with her. “It would have been nothing,” he said at last, “if you’d told me yourself. I shouldn’t have had to hear it from someone else.”

“Jill—”

“—isn’t the problem. You are.”

Shock stunned Lissa for a moment. “What are you saying?”

“I . . .” Christian suddenly looked weary. He rubbed his eyes. “I don’t know. It’s just . . . things have been rough lately. I just . . . I’m just not sure if I can deal with all this. You were picking fights with me before you left, and now this?”

“Why won’t you listen? It was nothing! Even Avery agreed.”

“Oh,” said Christian sarcastically, “if Avery agreed, then it must be okay.”

Lissa’s temper raised its ugly head. “What’s that supposed to mean? I thought you liked her.”

“I do. But I don’t like how you’re confiding in her more than me lately.”

“You didn’t have a problem with me confiding in Rose.”

“Avery’s not Rose.”

“Christian . . .”

He shook his head. “Look, I don’t really want to go to dinner anymore. I just need to think.”

“When am I going to see you again?” she asked frantically. Her anger had been supplanted by fear.

“I don’t know. Later.”

He left without another word. Lissa stared after him, aghast as he walked out of the lobby. She wanted to go throw herself at him, beg him to come back and forgive her. There were too many people around, however, and she refused to make a scene—or intrude on his space. Instead, she took off to the only resource she had left: Avery.

“Didn’t expect to see you again,” Avery said, opening the door to her room. “What are you—Jesus Christ. What’s the matter?”

She ushered Lissa in and demanded the story. With a lot of tears and near-hysteric rambling, Lissa related what had happened with Christian. “And I don’t know what he meant. Does he want to break up? Will he come talk to me later? Should I go to him?” Lissa buried her face in her hands. “Oh God. You don’t think there’s anything going on with him and Jill, do you?”

“Jailbait? No,” exclaimed Avery. “Of course not. Look, you need to calm down. You’re freaking me out. This is going to be okay.” Anxiety lined Avery’s face, and she went to get Lissa a glass of water. Then, reconsidering, she poured a glass of wine instead.

Sitting alone, Lissa felt her wild emotions torment her. She hated what she’d done. She felt like there was something wrong with her. First she’d alienated me, and now Christian. Why couldn’t she keep her friends? What did it take? Was she really going crazy? She felt out of control and desperate. And she—

Bam!

Suddenly, and without warning, I was *shoved* out of Lissa’s head.

Her thoughts disappeared completely. I’d neither left of my own choice, nor had I been snapped back because of something in my own body. I stood in the room alone, having come to a standstill while pacing and thinking. Never, never had anything like that happened to me. This had been like . . . well, like

a physical force. Like a glass wall or force field slamming down in front of me and pushing me back. It had been an outside power. It hadn't come from me.

But what was it? Had it been Lissa? To my knowledge, she'd never been able to feel me in her head. Had that changed? Had she kicked me out? Had her spinning feelings grown so strong that there was no room for me?

I didn't know, and I didn't like any of it. When it had happened, aside from the sensation of being pushed, I'd experienced another strange feeling. It was like a fluttering, as if someone had reached in and tickled my mind. I'd had brief warm and cold flashes, and then it had all stopped once I was out of her head. It had felt invasive.

And it had also felt . . . familiar.

TWENTY-THREE

UNFORTUNATELY, I COULDN'T REMEMBER where I'd felt it before. Considering everything else that had been happening to me, the fact that I'd even recalled it at all was remarkable. My memories were a little scattered, but I did my best to sift through them, wondering where I had experienced that tickling in my brain. I received no answers, and pondering it all soon became as frustrating as coming up with an escape plan.

And as more time passed, I realized I really did need an escape plan. The endorphin withdrawal was killing me, but I was thinking more and more clearly as the effects left my system. I was astonished at how out of it I'd let myself become. As soon as I'd allowed Dimitri to bite me . . . I'd fallen apart. I'd lost my higher reasoning. I'd lost my strength and skills. I'd become soft and silly and stupid. Well, not entirely. If I'd completely lost it, I'd be a Strigoi now. There was some comfort, at least, in knowing that even while high on bites, some part of me had still fought through and refused to succumb.

Knowing I wasn't as entirely weak as I'd believed helped keep me going. It made it easier to ignore the yearning in my body, to distract myself with bad TV and eating all the food in the little refrigerator. I even stayed awake for a long time in the hopes of exhausting myself. It worked, and I crashed as soon as I hit the pillow, drifting into a dreamless sleep with no withdrawal effects.

I was awakened later when a body slid into bed beside me. I opened my eyes and stared right into Dimitri's red ones. For the first time in days, I looked at him with fear, not love. I kept that off my face, though, and smiled at him. I reached out and touched his face.

"You're back. I missed you."

He caught my hand and kissed my palm. "I had things to do."

The shadows shifted on his face, and I caught the tiniest glimpse of dried blood near his mouth. Grimacing, I rubbed it off with my finger. "So I see."

"It's the natural order, Rose. How are you feeling?"

"Better. Except . . ."

"What?"

I looked away, conflicted again. The look in his eyes just then was more than simple curiosity. There was concern there—only a little—but it was there. Concern for me. And yet only a moment ago, I'd wiped blood from his face—blood from some poor person whose life had been snuffed out within the last few hours, most likely.

"I was in Lissa's head," I said at last. There was no harm in telling him this. Like Nathan, he knew she was at the Academy. "And . . . I got pushed out."

"Pushed out?"

"Yeah . . . I was seeing through her eyes like I usually do, and then some force . . . I don't know, an invisible hand shoved me out. I've never felt anything like it."

"Maybe it's a new spirit ability."

"Maybe. Except, I've been watching her regularly, and I've never seen her practice or even consider anything like that."

He shrugged slightly and put an arm around me. "Being awakened gives you better senses and accessibility to the world. But it doesn't make you omniscient. I don't know why that happened to you."

"Clearly not omniscient, or else Nathan wouldn't want information about her so badly. Why is that? Why are the Strigoi fixated on killing the royal lines? We know they've—you've—been doing it, but why? What does it matter? Isn't a victim a victim—especially when plenty of Strigoi used to be royal Moroi?"

"That requires a complicated answer. A large part of hunting Moroi royalty is fear. In your old world, royalty are held above all others. They get the best guardians, the best protection." Yes, that was certainly true. Lissa had discovered that much at Court. "If we can still get to them through that, then what does it say? It means no one is safe. It creates fear, and fear makes people do foolish things. It makes them easier prey."

"That's horrible."

"Prey or—"

"Yeah, yeah, I know. Prey or predator."

His eyes narrowed slightly, apparently not liking the interruption. He let it go. "There's also a benefit to unraveling Moroi leadership. That creates instability, too."

"Or maybe they'd be better off with a change of leadership," I said. He gave me another odd look, and I was a bit startled myself. There I was, thinking like Victor Dashkov again. I realized I should just be quiet. I wasn't behaving like my usual scattered and high self. "What's the rest?"

"The rest . . ." A smile curved up his lips. "The rest is prestige. We do it for the glory of it. For the reputation it gives us and the satisfaction of knowing we're responsible for destroying that which others haven't been able to destroy for centuries."

Simple Strigoi nature. Malice, hunting, and death. There didn't need to be any other reasons.

Dimitri's gaze moved past me to my bedside table. It was where I took off all my jewelry at night and laid it out. All his gifts were there, glittering like some pirate's treasure. Reaching over me, he lifted up the *nazar* on its chain. "You still have this."

"Yup. Not as pretty as your stuff, though." Seeing the blue eye reminded me of my mother. I hadn't thought about her in a very long time. Back in Baia, I'd grown to see Olena as a secondary mother, but now . . . now I kind of wished for my own. Janine Hathaway might not cook and clean, but she was smart and competent. And in some ways, I realized with a start, we thought alike.

My traits had come from her, and I knew with certainty that in this situation, she wouldn't have stopped planning escape.

"This I haven't seen before," Dimitri said. He'd set the *nazar* back down and picked up the plain silver ring Mark had given me. I hadn't worn it since I was last in the Belikov house and had set it on the table next to the *nazar*.

"I got it while I was—" I stopped, realizing I hadn't ever brought up my travels before Novosibirsk.

"While you were what?"

"While I was in your hometown. In Baia."

Dimitri was playing with the ring, moving it from fingertip to fingertip, but he paused and glanced over at me when I said the name. "You were there?" Strangely, we hadn't talked much about that. I'd mentioned Novosibirsk a few times, but that was it.

"I thought that's where you'd be," I explained. "I didn't know that Strigoi did their hunting in cities here. I stayed with your family."

His eyes returned to the ring. He continued playing with it, twirling it and rolling it around. "And?"

"And . . . they were nice. I liked them. I hung out with Viktoria a lot."

"Why wasn't she at school?"

"It was Easter."

"Ah, right. How was she?"

"Fine," I said quickly. I couldn't bring myself to tell him about that last night with her and Rolan. "Karolina's good too. She reminds me of you. She really laid into some dhampir guys who were causing trouble."

He smiled again, and it was . . . nice. I mean, the fangs still made it creepy, but it didn't have that sinister edge I'd come to expect. There was fondness in his face, true affection that startled me. "I can see Karolina doing that. Did she have her baby yet?"

"Yeah . . ." I was still a little thrown off by that smile. "It was a girl. Zoya."

"Zoya," he repeated, still not looking at me. "Not a bad name. How was Sonya?"

"Okay. I didn't see too much of her. She's a little touchy . . . . Viktoria says it's because of the pregnancy."

"Sonya's pregnant too?"

"Oh. Yeah. Six months, I think."

His smile dimmed a little bit, and he almost seemed concerned. "I suppose it had to happen sooner or later. Her decisions aren't always as wise as Karolina's. Karolina's children were by choice. . . . I'm guessing Sonya's was a surprise."

"Yeah. I kind of got that feeling too."

He ticked off the rest of his family members. "My mother and grandmother?"

"Er, fine. Both of them." This conversation was becoming increasingly strange. Not only was it the first normal one we'd had since I'd arrived, it was also the first time he'd really seemed interested in anything that wasn't Strigoi related or that didn't involve kissing and biting, aside from some reminiscing about our early fights together—and the teasing reminders of sex in the cabin. "Your grandmother scared me a little."

He laughed, and I flinched. It was so, so close to his old laugh. Closer than I'd ever imagined it could be. "Yes, she does that to people."

"And she pretended not to speak English." That was a pretty small detail in the grand scheme of things, but it still kind of pissed me off.

"Yes, she does that too." He continued smiling, voice fond. "Do they all still live together? In that same house?"

"Yup. I saw the books you told me about. The pretty ones—but I couldn't read them."

"That's where I first got into American westerns."

"Man, I loved making fun of you over those."

He chuckled. "Yes, between that, your stereotypes about Eastern European music, and the whole 'comrade' thing, you had plenty of material."

I laughed too. "'Comrade' and the music were kind of out of line." I'd almost forgotten about my old nickname for him. It didn't fit anymore. "But you brought the cowboy thing on yourself, between the leather duster and—" I stopped. I'd started to mention his duty to help those in need, but that was hardly the case anymore. He didn't notice my lapse.

"And then you left them and came to Novosibirsk?"

"Yeah. I came with those dhampirs I was hunting with . . . those other unpromised ones. I almost didn't, though. Your family wanted me to stay. I thought about doing it."

Dimitri held the ring up to the light, face shadowed with thought. He sighed. "You probably should have."

"They're good people."

"They are," he said softly. "You might have been happy there."

Reaching over, he set the ring back on the table and then turned to me, bringing our mouths together. It was the softest, sweetest kiss he'd given me as a Strigoi, and my already considerable shock increased. The gentleness was fleeting, though, and a few seconds later, our kissing returned to what it usually was, forceful and hungry. I had a feeling he was hungry for more than just kissing, too, despite having fed recently. Pushing aside my confusion over how . . . well, normal and kind he'd seemed while talking about his family, I tried to figure out how I was going to dodge more biting without raising suspicion. My body was still weak and wanting it, but in my head, I felt more like myself than I had in ages.

Dimitri pulled up from the kiss, and I blurted out the first thing that came to mind before he could do anything else. "What's it like?"

"What's what like?"

"Kissing."

He frowned. Score one for me. I'd momentarily baffled an undead creature of the night. Sydney would be proud.

"What do you mean?"

"You said being awakened enhances all the senses. Is kissing different then?"

"Ah." Understanding flashed over his features. "It is, kind of. My sense of smell is stronger than it used to be, so your scent comes through much more intensely . . . your sweat, the shampoo in your hair . . . it's beyond what you can imagine. Intoxicating. And of course, sharper taste and touch make this

better." He leaned down and kissed me again, and something about his description made my insides queasy—in a good way. That wasn't supposed to happen. My hope was to distract *him*—not myself.

"When we were outside the other night, the flowers were really strong. If they're strong to me, are they overwhelming to you? I mean, do the scents get to be too much?"

And so it began. I bombarded him with as many questions as I could, asking him about all aspects of Strigoi life. I wanted to know what it was like, how he felt . . . I asked everything with curiosity and enthusiasm, biting my lip and turning thoughtful at all the right places. I could see his interest grow as I spoke, though his attitude was brisk and efficient—in no way resembling our earlier affectionate conversation. He was hoping that I was finally on the verge of agreeing to turn.

As the questioning continued, so also did my outward signs of fatigue. I yawned a lot, lost my train of thought a lot. Finally, I rubbed my eyes with my hands and yawned again. "There's so much I didn't know . . . still don't know. . . ."

"I told you it was amazing."

Honestly, some of it was. Most of it was creepy as hell, but if you got over the whole undead and evil thing, there were definitely some perks to being Strigoi.

"I have more questions," I murmured. I closed my eyes and sighed, then opened them as though forcing myself to stay awake. "But . . . I'm so tired. . . . I still don't feel good. You don't think I have a concussion, do I?"

"No. And once you're awakened, it won't matter anyway."

"But not until you answer the rest of my questions." The words were muffled in a yawn, but he understood. It took him a while to respond.

"Okay. Not until then. But time is running out. I told you that before."

I let my lids drift closed then. "But it's not the second day yet. . . ."

"No," he said quietly. "Not yet."

I lay there, steadying my breathing as much as I could. Would my act work? It was highly possible he would still drink from me even if he thought I was asleep. I was taking a gamble here. One bite, and all my work to fight the withdrawal would be wasted. I'd reset to how I'd been. As it was, I had no clue how I was going to dodge a bite next time . . . but then, I didn't think there'd be a next time. I'd be a Strigoi by then.

Dimitri lay beside me for a few more minutes, and then I felt him move. Inside, I braced myself. Damn. Here it came. The bite. I'd been certain that our kissing was part of the allure of him drinking from me and that if I just fell asleep, the allure would be gone. Apparently not. All my pretending was for nothing. It was all over.

But it wasn't.

He got up and left.

When I heard the door close, I almost thought it was a scam. I thought for sure he was trying to fake me out and still actually stood in the room. Yet when I felt the Strigoi nausea fade, I realized the truth. He really had left me, thinking I needed to sleep. My act had been convincing.

I immediately sat up, turning a few different things over in my mind. In that

last bit of his visit, he'd seemed . . . well, he'd reminded me more than ever of the old Dimitri. Sure, he'd still been Strigoi through and through, but there'd been something else. A bit of warmth to his laugh. Sincere interest and affection upon hearing about his family. Had that been it? Had hearing news of his family triggered some piece of his soul buried within the monster? I confess, I felt a little jealous at the thought that *they* might have wrought the change in him that I couldn't. But he'd still had that same warmth in talking about us, just a little. . . .

No, no. I had to stop this. There was no change. No reversal of his state. It was wishful thinking, and the more I regained *my* old self, the more I realized the truth of the situation.

Dimitri's actions had made me recall something. I'd completely forgotten about Oksana's ring. I picked it up from the table and slipped it on my finger. I felt no noticeable change, but if the healing magic was still in it, it might help me. It could expedite my body and mind healing from the withdrawal. If any of Lissa's darkness was bleeding into me, the ring could help dampen that, too.

I sighed. No matter how often I told myself I was free of her, I never would be. She was my best friend. We were connected in a way that few could understand. The denial I'd been living under lifted. I regretted my actions with Adrian now. He'd come to me for help, and I'd thrown his kindness back in his face. Now I was bereft of communication with the outside world.

And thinking of Lissa reminded me again of what had happened earlier when I'd been in her mind. What had pushed me out? I hesitated, pondering my course of action. Lissa was far away and possibly in trouble. Dimitri and the other Strigoi were here. But . . . I couldn't walk away quite yet. I had to take one more look at her, just a quick one. . . .

I found her in an unexpected place. She was with Deirdre, a counselor on campus. Lissa had been seeing a counselor ever since spirit had begun manifesting, but it had been someone else. Expanding my senses to Lissa's thoughts, I read the story: Her counselor had left shortly after the school's attack. Lissa had been reassigned to Deirdre—who had once counseled me when everyone thought I was going crazy over Mason's death.

Deirdre was a very polished-looking Moroi, always meticulously dressed with her blond hair styled to perfection. She didn't look much older than us, and with me, her counseling method had resembled a police interrogation. With Lissa, she was more gentle. It figured.

"Lissa, we're a little worried about you. Normally, you would have been suspended. I actually stopped that from happening. I keep feeling like there's something going on that you aren't telling me. Some other issue."

Lissa suspended? I again reached in to read the situation and found it. Last night, Lissa and others had been busted for breaking into the library of all places and having an impromptu party complete with alcohol and destruction to some of the property. Good God. My best friend needed to join AA.

Lissa's arms were crossed, her demeanor almost combative. "There's no issue. We were just trying to have fun. I'm sorry for the damage. If you want to suspend me, go ahead."

Deirdre shook her head. "That's not my decision. My concern is the *why* here. I know you used to suffer from depression and other problems because

of your, ah, magic. But this feels more like some kind of rebellion."

Rebellion? Oh, it was more than that. Since their fight, Lissa had been unable to find Christian, and it was killing her. She couldn't handle downtime now. All she thought about was him—or me. Partying and risk taking were the only things that could distract her from us.

"Students do this stuff all the time," argued Lissa. "Why is it a big deal for me?"

"Well, because you put yourself in danger. After the library, you were on the verge of breaking into the pool. Swimming while intoxicated is definite cause for alarm."

"Nobody drowned. Even if someone had started to, I'm sure that between all of us, we could have pulled them out."

"It's just alarming, considering some of the self-destructive behaviors you once exhibited, like the cutting. . . ."

So it went for the next hour, and Lissa did as good a job as I used to in dodging Deirdre's questions. When the session ended, Deirdre said she wasn't going to recommend disciplinary action. She wanted Lissa back for more counseling. Lissa would have actually preferred detention or cleaning boards.

As she stalked furiously across campus, she spotted Christian going in the opposite direction. Hope lit the blackness of her mind like sunshine. "Christian!" she yelled, running up to him.

He stopped, giving her a wary look. "What do you want?"

"What do you mean what do I want?" She wanted to throw herself in his arms and have him tell her everything would be okay. She was upset and overwhelmed and filled with darkness . . . but there was a piece of vulnerability there that desperately needed him. "I haven't been able to find you."

"I've just been . . ." His face darkened. "I don't know. Thinking. Besides, from what I hear, you haven't been too bored." No surprise everyone knew about last night's fiasco. That kind of thing spread like wildfire thanks to the Academy's gossip mill.

"It was nothing," she said. The way he regarded her made her heart ache.

"That's the thing," he said. "Everything's nothing lately. All your partying. Making out with other guys. Lying."

"I haven't been lying!" she exclaimed. "And when are you going to get over Aaron?"

"You aren't telling me the truth. It's the same thing." It was an echo of Jill's sentiment. Lissa barely knew her and was really starting to hate her. "I just can't handle this. I can't be a part of you going back to your days of being a royal girl doing crazy stunts with your other royal friends."

Here's the thing. If Lissa had elaborated on her feelings more, on just how much her guilt and depression were eating her up and making her spin out of control . . . well, I think Christian would have been there for her in an instant. Despite his cynical exterior, he had a good heart—and Lissa owned most of it. Or used to. Now all he could see was her being silly and shallow and returning to a lifestyle he despised.

"I'm not!" she exclaimed. "I'm just . . . I don't know. It just feels good to sort of let loose."

"I can't do it," he said. "I can't be with you if that's your life now."

Her eyes went wide. "Are you breaking up with me?"

"I'm . . . I don't know. Yeah, I guess." Lissa was so consumed by the shock and horror of this that she didn't really see Christian the way I did, didn't see the agony in his eyes. It destroyed him to have to do this. He was hurting too, and all he saw was the girl he loved changing and becoming someone he couldn't be with. "Things aren't the way they used to be."

"You can't do that," she cried. She didn't see his pain. She saw him as being cruel and unfair. "We need to talk about this—figure it out—"

"The time for talking's past," he argued. "You should have been ready to talk sooner—not now, not when things suddenly aren't going your way."

Lissa didn't know whether she wanted to scream or cry. She just knew she couldn't lose Christian—not after losing me, too. If she lost both of us, there was nothing left for her in the world.

"Please, don't do this," she begged. "I can change."

"I'm sorry," he snapped. "I just don't see any evidence of that."

He turned and abruptly walked away. To her, his departure was harsh and cold. But again, I'd seen the anguish in his eyes. I think he left because he knew if he stayed, he wasn't going to be able to go through with this decision—this decision that hurt but that he felt was right. Lissa started to go after him when a hand suddenly pulled her back. She turned and saw Avery and Adrian standing there. From the looks on their faces, they'd overheard everything.

"Let him go," said Adrian gravely. He'd been the one to grab her. He dropped his hand and laced his fingers through Avery's. "Going after him now's just going to make it worse. Give him his space."

"He can't do this," said Lissa. "He can't do this to me."

"He's upset," said Avery, her concern mirroring Adrian's. "He isn't thinking straight. Wait for him to cool off, and he'll come around."

Lissa stared off after Christian's retreating figure, her heart breaking. "I don't know. I don't know if he will. Oh God. I can't lose him."

My own heart broke. I wanted so badly to go to her, to comfort her and be there for her. She felt so alone, and I felt horrible for leaving her. Something had pushed her into this downward spiral, and I should have been there to help her out of it. That was what best friends did. I needed to be there.

Lissa turned back and looked at Avery. "I'm so confused. . . . I don't know what to do."

Avery met her eyes, but when she did . . . the strangest thing happened. Avery wasn't looking at her. She was looking at *me*.

Oh jeez. Not you again.

The voice rang in my head, and *snap*! I was out of Lissa.

There it was, the mental shove, the brush of my mind and waves of hot and cold. I stared around my room, shocked at how abrupt the transition had been. Yet I'd learned something. I knew then that Lissa hadn't been the one to shove me out before or now. Lissa had been too distracted and too distraught. The voice? That hadn't been hers either.

And then, I finally remembered where I'd felt that brushing touch in my head. Oksana. It was the same sensation I'd experienced when she had reached out to my mind, trying to get a feel for my moods and intentions, an

action that both she and Mark admitted was invasive and wrong if you weren't bonded to someone.

Carefully, I replayed what had just happened with Lissa. Once again, I saw those last few moments. Blue-gray eyes staring at me—*me*, not Lissa.

Lissa hadn't pushed me out of her head.

Avery had.

TWENTY-FOUR

Oh shit. AVERY WAS A SPIRIT USER.

I sat back down on the bed, my mind reeling. I'd never seen it coming. Hell, no one had. Avery had made a good show of being an air user. Each Moroi had a very low level of control in each element. She'd just barely done enough with air to make it seem like that was her specialization. No one had questioned her further because honestly, who would have ever expected another spirit user around? And since she was out of school, she had no reason to be tested anymore or forced to demonstrate her ability. No one was there to call her on it.

The more I thought about it, the more the little signs were there. The charming personality, the way she could talk people into anything. How many of her interactions were spirit controlled? And was it possible . . . was it possible that Adrian's attraction had been compulsion on her part? I had no reason to feel happy about that, but . . . well, I did.

More to the point, what did Avery want with Lissa? Avery compelling Adrian into liking her wasn't too out there. He was good-looking and came from an important family. He was the queen's great-nephew, and although family members of the current monarch could never inherit the throne immediately afterward, he'd have a good future, one that would always keep him in the highest circles of society.

But Lissa? What was Avery's game there? What did she have to gain? Lissa's behavior all made sense now—the uncharacteristic partying, weird moods, jealousy, fights with Christian . . . Avery was pushing Lissa over the edge, causing her to make horrible choices. Avery was using some sort of compulsion to spin Lissa out of control, alienating her and putting her life in danger. Why? What did Avery want?

It didn't matter. The why wasn't important. The *how* was, as in how I was going to get out of here and back to my best friend.

I looked down at myself, at the delicate silk dress I wore. Suddenly, I hated it. It was a sign of how I'd been, weak and useless. I hastily took it off and ransacked my closet. They'd taken away my jeans and T-shirt, but I'd at least been allowed to keep my hoodie. I put on the green sweaterdress, seeing as it was the sturdiest thing I had, feeling moderately more capable. I slipped the hoodie on over it. It hardly made me feel like a badass warrior, but I *did* feel more competent. Sufficiently dressed for action, I returned to the living room and started that pacing that tended to help me think better—not that I had

any reason to believe I was going to come up with new ideas. I'd been trying to for days and days with no luck. *Nothing* was going to change.

"Damn it!" I yelled, feeling better with the outburst. Angry, I flounced into the desk chair, amazed that I hadn't simply thrown it against the wall in my frustration.

The chair wobbled, ever so slightly.

Frowning, I stood up and looked at it. Everything else in this place was state-of-the-art. Odd that I'd have a faulty chair. I knelt down and examined it more closely. There, on one of the legs, was a crack near where the leg joined with the seat. I stared. All of the furniture here was industrial strength, with no obvious joints. I should know, seeing how long I'd beat this chair against the wall when I first arrived. I hadn't even dented it. Where had this crack come from? Slamming it over and over had done nothing.

But I hadn't been the only one to hit it.

That very first day, I'd fought with Dimitri and come after him with the chair. He'd taken it from me and thrown it against the wall. I'd never paid attention to it again, having given up on breaking it. When I'd later tried cracking the window, I'd used an end table because it was heavier. My strength hadn't been able to damage the chair—but his had.

I picked up the chair and immediately slammed it into that diamond-hard window, half-hoping I might kill two birds with one stone. Nope. Both remained intact. So I did it again. And again. I lost track of how many times I slammed that chair into the glass. My hands hurt, and I knew despite my recovery, I still wasn't at full strength. It was infuriating.

Finally, on what felt like my gazillionth try, I looked at the chair and saw the crack had grown bigger. The progress renewed my will and strength. I hit and hit, ignoring the pain as the wood bit into my hands. At long last, I heard a crack, and the leg broke off. I picked it up and stared in amazement. The break hadn't been clean. It was splintered and sharp. Sharp enough to be a stake? I wasn't sure. But I knew for a fact that wood was hard, and if I used enough force, I might be able to hit a Strigoi's heart. It wouldn't kill one, but the blow would stun. I didn't know if it'd be enough to get me out of here, but it was all I had now. And it was a hell of a lot more than I'd had one hour ago.

I sat back on the bed, recovering from my battle with the chair and tossing the makeshift stake back and forth. Okay. I had a weapon now. But what could I do with it? Dimitri's face flashed in my mind's eye. Damn it. There was no question about it. He was the obvious target, the one I'd have to deal with first.

The door suddenly clicked open, and I looked up with alarm. Quickly, I shoved the chair into a dark corner as panic raced through me. No, no. I wasn't ready. I hadn't fully convinced myself to stake him—

It was Inna. She carried a tray but didn't wear her usual subservient expression. The brief look she gave me was filled with hate. I didn't know what she had to be pissed off about. It wasn't like I'd caused her any damage.

Yet.

I strode over like I was going to examine the tray. Lifting the lid, I saw a ham sandwich and french fries. It looked good—I hadn't eaten in a while—but the adrenaline running through me had shoved any appetite I might have to

the background. I glanced back up at her, smiling sweetly. She shot me daggers.

Don't hesitate, Dimitri had always said.

I didn't.

I jumped at Inna, throwing her so hard against the floor that her head slammed back. She looked dazed, but quickly recovered and tried to fight back. I wasn't drugged up this time—well, not much—and my years of training and natural strength finally showed themselves again. I pressed my body against her, keeping her firmly in place. Then, I produced the stake I'd had concealed and pressed those sharp points against her neck.

It was like being back in the days of pinning Strigoi in alleys. She couldn't see that my weapon was a chair leg, but the sharp points got her attention as I dug them into her throat.

"The code," I said. "What is the code?"

Her only response was a string of obscenities in Russian. Okay, not a surprise, considering she probably didn't understand me. I flipped through the meager Russian-English dictionary in my head. I'd been in the country long enough to pick up some vocabulary. Admittedly, it was equivalent to a two-year-old's, but even they could communicate.

"Numbers," I said in Russian. "Door." At least, that's what I hoped I said.

She said more impolite things to me, her expression defiant. It really was the Strigoi interrogation all over. My stake bit harder, drawing blood, and I forcibly restrained myself. I might question whether I had the strength to pierce a Strigoi heart with this, but severing a human's vein? Cake. She faltered a little, apparently realizing the same thing.

Again, I attempted my broken Russian. "Kill you. No Nathan. Never . . ." What was the word? The church service came back to me, and I hoped I had it right. "Never eternal life."

It got her attention. Nathan and eternal life. The things most important to her. She bit her lip, still angry, but her tirade had stopped.

"Numbers. Door," I repeated. I pushed the stake in harder, and she cried out in pain.

At last she spoke, rattling off a series of digits. Russian numbers were something I had memorized pretty solidly, at least. They were essential for addresses and phone numbers. She cited seven numbers.

"Again," I said. I made her say it three times and hoped I had it. But there was more. I was pretty sure the outer door had a different code. "Numbers. Door. Two." I felt like a caveman.

Inna stared, not quite getting it.

"Door. Two."

Understanding glinted in her eyes, and she looked mad. I think she'd hoped I wouldn't realize the other door had its own code. More cutting with the stake made her scream seven more numbers. Again, I made her repeat them, realizing I had no way to know if she was telling me the truth—at least until I tried the numbers. For that reason, I decided to keep her around.

I felt guilty about what I did next, but these were desperate times. In guardian training, I'd been taught both to kill and to incapacitate. I did the latter this time, slamming her head back against the floor and rendering her

unconscious. Her expression went slack, her eyelids drooping. Damn. I was reduced to hurting teenage humans.

Standing up, I moved to the door and punched in the first set of numbers, hoping I had them right. To my complete and utter astonishment, I did. The electronic lock clicked, but before I could open the door, I just barely made out another click. Someone had unlocked the outer door.

"Shit," I muttered.

I pulled away from the door immediately, picked up Inna's unconscious body, and hurried to the bathroom. I set her in the tub as gently as possible and had just shut the bathroom door when I heard the main door open. I felt the telltale nausea that signaled a Strigoi was nearby. I knew one of the Strigoi could smell a human, and I hoped shutting her away would be enough to mute Inna's scent. I emerged from the hall and found Dimitri in the living room. I grinned at him and ran into his arms.

"You're back," I said happily.

He held me briefly and then stepped back. "Yes." He seemed slightly pleased at the greeting, but soon his face was all business. "Have you made your decision?"

No hello. No *how are you feeling?* My heart sank. This wasn't Dimitri.

"I have more questions."

I went over to the bed and lay down in a casual way, just like we always did. He followed a few moments later and sat on the edge, looking down at me.

"How long will it take?" I asked. "When you awaken me? Is it instantaneous?"

Once more, I launched into an interrogation session. Honestly, I was running out of questions, and at this point, I didn't really want to know the intricacies of becoming Strigoi. I was becoming more and more agitated with each passing moment. I had to act. I had to make use of my fleeting opportunity here.

And yet . . . before I could act, I had to reassure myself that this really wasn't Dimitri. It was stupid. I should know by now. I could see the physical changes. I'd seen his coldness, the brutality. I'd seen him come fresh from a kill. This wasn't the man I'd loved. And yet . . . for that one fleeting moment earlier . . .

With a sigh, Dimitri stretched out beside me. "Rose," he interrupted, "if I didn't know better, I'd say you were stalling for time." Yeah, even as a Strigoi, Dimitri knew how I thought and schemed. I realized if I was going to be convincing, I had to stop playing dumb and remember to be Rose Hathaway.

I put on a look of outrage. "Of course I am! This is a big deal. I came here to kill you, and now you're asking me to join you. You think this is easy for me to do?"

"Do you think it's been easy for me to wait this long?" he asked. "The only ones who get choices are Moroi who willingly kill, like the Ozeras. No one else gets a choice. I didn't get a choice."

"And don't you regret that?"

"No, not now. Now that I'm who I was meant to be." He frowned. "The only thing hurt is my pride—that Nathan forced me and that he acts as though I'm

indebted to him. Which is why I'm being kind enough to give you the choice now, for the sake of your pride."

Kind, huh? I looked at him and felt my heart breaking all over again. It was like hearing the news of his death once more. I suddenly grew afraid I might cry. No. No tears. Dimitri always talked about prey and predators. I had to be the predator.

"You're sweating," he said suddenly. "Why?"

Damn, damn, damn. Of course I was sweating. I was contemplating staking the man I loved—or thought I'd loved. And along with sweat, I was sure I was giving off pheromones of my agitation. Strigoi could smell all of those things, too.

"Because I'm scared," I whispered. I propped myself up and stroked the edge of his face, trying to memorize all of his features. The eyes. The hair. The shape of his cheekbones. In my imagination, I overlaid the things I remembered. Dark eyes. Tanned skin. Sweet smile. "I . . . I think I'm ready, but it's . . . I don't know. It's such a big thing."

"It'll be the best decision of your life, Roza."

My breathing was growing rapid, and I prayed he'd think it was because of my fear of being turned. "Tell me again. One more time. Why do you want to awaken me so badly?"

A slightly weary look crossed his face. "Because I want you. I've always wanted you."

And that's when I knew. I finally realized the problem. He'd given that same answer over and over, and each time, something about it had bothered me. I'd never been able to pinpoint it, though. Now I could. He wanted me. Wanted me in the way people wanted possessions or collectibles. The Dimitri I'd known . . . the one I'd fallen for and slept with . . . that Dimitri would have said he wanted us to be together because he loved me. There was no love here.

I smiled at him. Leaning down, I kissed him gently. He probably thought I was doing it for the reasons I always did, out of attraction and desire. In truth, it was a goodbye kiss. His mouth answered mine, his lips warm and eager. I held out the kiss a little longer, both to fight back the tears leaking out of my eyes and to lull him into an unsuspecting state. My hand closed around the chair leg, which I'd hidden in my hoodie pocket.

I would never forget Dimitri, not for the rest of my life. And this time, I wouldn't forget his lessons.

With a speed he wasn't ready for, I struck out and plunged the stake through his chest. My strength was there—sliding the stake past the ribs and straight into his heart.

And as I did it, it was like piercing my own heart at the same time.

TWENTY-FIVE

HIS EYES WIDENED IN SHOCK, lips parting. Even though I knew this wasn't a silver stake, it might as well have been. To run it through his heart, I had had to act as decisively as I would have if delivering a killing blow. I'd had to finally accept *my* Dimitri's death. This one was a Strigoi. There was no future with him. I would not join him.

That still didn't make some part of me want to stop and lie down beside him, though, or at the very least see what happened next. After that initial surprise, his features and breathing had gone still, giving the illusion of death. That's all it was, however—an illusion. I'd seen it before. I probably had five minutes at most before he healed up and shook this off. I had no time to mourn for what was and what might have been. I had to act now. No hesitation.

I ran my hands over him, searching his clothes for anything that might be of use. I found a set of keys and some cash. I pocketed the keys and started to leave the cash but realized I might actually need it on the off chance I escaped this place. My own money had been taken when I arrived. I also swept up some of the jewelry on the table. Finding buyers for that kind of thing in big Russian cities wasn't too difficult.

If I made it to said city. I stood up off the bed and gave Dimitri one last pained look. A few of the tears I'd hidden from him earlier now ran down my face. That was all I could allow myself. If I had a *later*, I'd mourn then. Before leaving, my gaze lingered on the stake. I wanted to take it with me; it was my only weapon. Pulling it out would mean he'd wake up in about a minute. I needed the extra time. With a sigh, I turned my back on him, hoping I'd find a weapon elsewhere.

I sprinted over to the suite's door and punched in the code again. It unlocked, and I stepped into the corridor. Before going to the next door, I examined the one I'd just stepped through. To get into the suite, there was another keypad. Entry also required a code. Backing up a little, I struck and kicked the keypad as hard as I could. I did it twice more, until the tiny red light on it went out. I didn't know if that would affect the lock on the inside of the suite, but in the movies, damaging electronic locks always seemed to work.

Turning my attention to the next lock, I tried to remember the numbers Inna had told me. They weren't etched as strongly in my head as the first. I punched in seven numbers. The little light stayed red.

"Damn." It was possible she'd lied about this set, but somehow, I suspected

my memory was the culprit here. I tried again, knowing the clock was ticking on how long I had until Dimitri came after me. The red light flashed again. What were those numbers? I tried to visualize them in my head and finally decided I wasn't entirely sure about the last two. I reversed their order the next time I put in the code. The light flashed green, and the door unlocked.

Of course, there was a security system of a different sort outside. A Strigoi. And not just any Strigoi: It was Marlen. The one I'd tortured in the alley. The one who hated me because I'd disgraced him in front of Galina. He was clearly on guard duty and looked as though he'd expected a boring night. Me coming out the door was a shock.

That gave me, oh, about a millisecond of surprise. My first thought was to just run at him with as much brute strength as I could. I knew he would do the same to me. In fact . . . that was *exactly* what he'd do.

I stayed where I was, standing so that I could keep the door propped open. He came at me to stop my escape, and I stepped aside, pulling the door open wider. Now, I was neither skilled enough nor was he inept enough to simply get lured in. He stopped in the doorway, trying to get hold of me. This gave me the difficult task of trying to both fend him off and drag him into the corridor behind the door. I stepped back into the doorway, hoping he'd follow. All the while, I had to keep the door open. It was all complicated, and I would have no time to punch in the code again.

We fought in the confined space. The biggest thing I had going for me was that Marlen appeared to be a young Strigoi, which made sense. Galina would want to keep around henchmen she could control. Of course, Strigoi strength and speed compensated for a lack of experience. The fact that he had been a Moroi once also meant he probably had very little training. That also was a bonus for me. Dimitri was a badass Strigoi because he'd trained as a fighter before being turned. This guy had not.

So, Marlen got a couple punches in on me, one coming dangerously close to my eye. The other caught me in the stomach, knocking the air out of me for half a second. But most of the time, I was able to dodge him pretty well. This seemed to infuriate him. Getting beat up by a teenage girl didn't really score you cool points when you were a Strigoi. At one point, I even faked him out in one direction and came at him with a surprise kick—easier to do than I'd expected in that damned dress—that knocked him back a few steps. I just barely managed to keep my hand in the door when I did it, but that was all I needed. His stumble gave me a few seconds to slip out the door and into the main hall. Unfortunately, when I tried to close it, he was already trying to come through. With my hands, I tried to pull the door shut while kicking him back inside. We struggled this way for a while, and thanks to whatever luck I had left, I got the door closed enough so that only his arm was sticking through. Bracing myself, I pulled the door toward me in one huge, forceful movement. It slammed into Marlen's wrist. I half expected to see his hand detach and pop into the hall, but he'd jerked it back. Even Strigoi had certain instincts to avoid pain.

Gasping—my physical strength still wasn't all it could be—I backed up. If he knew the code, this had been for nothing. A moment later, the door's handle shook but didn't open. I heard a scream of rage, and then his fists beat on the

door.

Score one for me. No, score one for luck. If he'd known the code, I would have been—

Thud. Marlen was still beating on the door, and I saw the tiniest dent appear on the metallic surface.

"Oh, crap," I said.

I didn't stick around to see how many hits it'd take him to break it down. I also realized that even if I'd disabled the first lock, Dimitri would just be able to break that one down too. Dimitri . . .

No. I absolutely couldn't think of him now.

As I ran down the hall, heading toward the stairs Dimitri and I traveled before, an unexpected memory suddenly popped into my head. When Dimitri had last threatened Nathan, he'd mentioned getting my stake out of a vault. What vault was that exactly? Was it here on the premises? If so, I certainly didn't have time to look. When weighing the option to search a four-story house full of vampires or run off into the countryside before they found you . . . well, the choice was clear.

And it was in the midst of that thought process that I ran into a human at the top of the stairs. He was older than Inna and carrying a stack of linens that he dropped when we collided. With almost no pause, I grabbed hold of him and swung him against the wall. I had no weapon to threaten him with and wondered how I'd assert my will now. Yet as soon as I had him pinned, he threw up his hands in a defensive gesture and began whimpering in Russian. There'd be no attacks on me here.

Of course, now I had the problem of communicating what I needed. Marlen was still beating on the door, and Dimitri would be up in a couple of minutes. I glared at the human, hoping I looked terrifying. From his expression, I did. I attempted the caveman talk I had with Inna . . . only this time the message was a little harder.

"Stick," I said in Russian. I had no clue what the word for stake was. I pointed at the silver ring I wore and made a slashing motion. "Stick. Where?"

He stared at me in utter confusion and then asked, in perfect English, "Why are you talking like that?"

"Oh for God's sake," I exclaimed. "Where is the vault?"

"Vault?"

"A place they keep weapons?"

He continued staring.

"I'm looking for a silver stake."

"Oh," he said. "That." Uneasily, he cast his eyes in the direction of the pounding.

I pushed him harder against the wall. My heart felt like it would burst out of my chest, but I tried to hide it. I wanted this guy to think I was invincible. "Ignore him. Take me to the vault. Now!"

With a frightened yelp, he nodded eagerly and beckoned me down the stairs. We descended to the second floor and made a sharp turn. The halls here were as twisty as the hedge maze Dimitri had shown me, all decorated in that gold and chandelier style, and I wondered if I'd even be able to get out of the house. Attempting this detour was a risk, but I wasn't sure if I could get

outside without being followed. If I was, there'd be a confrontation. I'd need to defend myself.

The human led me down another hall and yet another. Finally, we reached a door that looked like any other. He stopped and peered at me expectantly.

"Open it," I said.

He shook his head. "I don't have the key."

"Well, I certainly don't—wait." I reached into my pocket and pulled out the keys I'd lifted from Dimitri. There were five keys on the ring. I tried them one at a time, and on the third one, I got a hit. The door opened.

Meanwhile, my guide was casting hasty glances behind him and looked ready to bolt.

"Don't even think about it," I warned. He blanched and stayed put. The room before us wasn't very big, and while its plush white carpet and silver-framed paintings made it look elegant, the room was . . . well, basically, it looked like a junkyard. Boxes and weird objects—a lot of personal items like watches and rings in particular—lay around in no order. "What is this?"

"Magic," he said, still obviously scared out of his mind. "Magic items kept here to fade or be destroyed."

Magic . . . ah. These were items charmed by Moroi magic. Charms always had some kind of effect on Strigoi—usually unpleasant—with stakes being the worst, since they used all four physical elements. It made sense that Strigoi would want to isolate harmful objects and get rid of—

"My stake!"

I ran forward and picked it up, nearly dropping it because my hands were so sweaty. The stake was lying on top of a box with a length of cloth and some weird stones. Studying it, I realized it wasn't actually *my* stake—not that it made a difference for killing Strigoi. This stake was almost identical, save for a small geometric pattern running around its base. It was something guardians did from time to time if they felt particularly attached to their stake: have a design or initials etched into it. Holding this stake, I felt a momentary pang of sadness. This had belonged to someone who'd wielded it proudly once, someone who was now most likely dead. God only knew how many other dozens of stakes were in here, seized from other unfortunate prisoners, but I had no time to search or mourn those who had died.

"Okay, now I want you to take me to . . ." I hesitated. Even with a stake, it'd be a lot better for me if I didn't face any more Strigoi. I had to assume there'd still be a guard at the front door. ". . . Some room on this floor with a window that actually opens. And is far from the stairs."

The guy thought for a moment and then gave a quick nod. "This way."

I followed him through another maze of twisting corridors. "What's your name?"

"Oleg."

"You know," I said. "I'm getting out of here . . . if you want . . . if you want, I could take you with me." Having someone else—a human, particularly—would definitely slow me down. Yet, my conscience wouldn't let me leave anyone behind in this place.

He gave me an incredulous glance. "Why would I want to do that?" Sydney had definitely been right about humans making great sacrifices for

immortality. Oleg and Inna were living proof.

We rounded a corner and came face-to-face with an elaborate set of French doors. Through the etched glass, I could see book-lined shelves, stretching all the way up the walls. A library—a huge one that extended on and on, out of my sight. Better yet, I saw a large bay window opposite me, framed in heavy satin curtains the color of blood.

"Perfect," I said, pushing open the doors.

That was when the nausea hit me. We weren't alone in the room.

Galina sprang up from a chair near the fireplace on the far side of the room. A book dropped from her lap. I had no time to dwell on the oddity of a Strigoi having a fireside read, because she was coming right toward me. I almost might have thought Oleg had set me up, but he was cowering in a corner, his face mirroring the shock I felt. Despite the library's enormous size, she reached me in seconds.

I dodged her initial attack—or tried to, at least. She was *fast*. Aside from Dimitri, the other Strigoi in this house were clearly the B-team, and I had forgotten just how badass a truly skilled Strigoi was. She caught me by my arm and swung me toward her, mouth open and fangs going straight for my neck. I had the stake in my hand and tried awkwardly to at least scratch her with it, but she was holding me too tightly. At last, I managed to duck a little and move my throat out of her range, but all this did was give her the opportunity to grab hold of my hair. She jerked me upright, and I screamed in pain. How she managed to hold onto my hair without ripping it right out was remarkable. Still gripping it, she shoved me into a wall.

When I'd first fought with Dimitri upon my arrival, he'd been rough but hadn't wanted to kill me. Galina did. She'd taken it on faith from Dimitri that I'd be an asset, but it was obvious now that I was a real pain in the ass. Her amnesty had ended, and she was intent on killing me. I at least had the comfort of knowing she probably wouldn't turn me into a Strigoi. I'd be lunch.

A shout suddenly drew my attention to the door. Dimitri stood there, face blazing with anger. Whatever illusions I'd harbored about him being his former self disappeared. That fury radiated around him, his eyes narrowed and fangs showing. The pale skin and red eyes contrasted sharply against each other. He was like a demon sent straight from hell to destroy me. He strode toward us, and the immediate thought in my head was: *Well, at least this'll end things that much faster*.

Except . . . it wasn't me he attacked. It was Galina.

I'm not sure which of us was more surprised, but in that moment, I was totally forgotten. The Strigoi raced toward each other, and I froze, stunned at the terrible beauty of their fight. There was almost a gracefulness to the way they moved, the way they struck out and skillfully dodged each other. I stared a bit longer and then mentally slapped myself into action. This was my chance to get out of here. I couldn't get distracted.

I turned to the bay window, searching frantically for a means to open it. There was none. "Son of a bitch!" Maybe Oleg had set me up after all. Or maybe there was just some mechanism that wasn't apparent to me. Regardless, I felt pretty confident there was one way to get it open.

I ran to the side of the room where Galina had sat and grabbed an ornate

wooden chair. It was obvious this window wasn't made of the hard-core glass that had been in my room. This stuff was similar to the library's French doors, delicate and engraved with fanciful designs, even though darkly tinted. It couldn't require that much force to break. After all that fruitless beating in my room, I took a kind of smug satisfaction in slamming the chair into it with as much force as possible. The impact made a huge hole in one side of the window, glass spraying everywhere. A few shards hit my face, but it was nothing to concern me now.

Behind me, the sounds of battle raged on. There were grunts and muffled cries as they fought, as well as the occasional sound of some piece of broken furniture. I yearned to turn around and see what was going on, but I couldn't. I took the chair and swung again, breaking the other half of the window. There was now a huge hole, perfect for me to get out of.

"Rose!"

Dimitri's voice triggered some instinctive response in me. I glanced back and saw him still grappling with Galina. They were both exhausted, but it was clear he was getting the worst of it. But in their fighting, he kept trying to restrain her in a way that exposed her chest to me. His eyes met mine. Back when he'd been a dhampir, we'd rarely needed words to convey our thoughts. This was one of those times. I knew what he wanted me to do. He wanted me to stake her.

I knew I shouldn't. I needed to hop out that window right *now*. I needed to let them keep fighting, even though it seemed obvious Galina was about to win. And yet . . . despite my misgivings, some force drew me across the room, stake poised and ready. Maybe it was because I would never fully lose my pull to Dimitri, no matter what kind of monster he'd become. Maybe it was an unconscious sense of duty, since I knew he'd just saved my life. Or maybe it was because I knew one Strigoi was going to die tonight, and she was the more dangerous.

But she wasn't easy to get hold of. She was fast and strong, and he was having a hard time with her. She kept wriggling around, trying to renew her attack. All she'd need to do was incapacitate him as I had; then it'd just require decapitation or burning to finish him off. I had no doubt she could arrange either.

He managed to turn her slightly, giving me the best view of her chest I'd had. I moved forward—and then Dimitri slammed into me. I was addled for a moment, wondering why he'd attack me after saving me, until I realized he'd been pushed—by Nathan. Nathan had just entered the library, along with Marlen. It distracted Dimitri but not me. I still had the opening he'd given me on Galina, and I plunged my stake into her chest. It didn't go in as deeply as I would have liked, and she still managed to fight me, bucking hard. I grimaced and pushed forward, knowing the silver had to be affecting her. A moment later, I saw the pain twist her face. She faltered, and I pushed my advantage, shoving the stake in all the way. It took several seconds, but she eventually stopped moving, her body crumpling to the ground.

If the other Strigoi noticed her death, they didn't pay attention. Nathan and Marlen were fixated on Dimitri. Another Strigoi—a female I didn't recognize—soon joined the face-off. I jerked my stake out of Galina and slowly began

backing toward the window, hoping I wouldn't attract too much attention. My heart went out to Dimitri. He was outnumbered. I could possibly lend my strength and help him fight. . . .

Of course, my strength was fading. I was still suffering from days of vampire bites and blood loss. I'd fought two Strigoi tonight and killed a powerful one. That had been my good deed, removing her from the world. The next best thing I could do would be to leave and let these Strigoi finish off Dimitri. The surviving ones would be leaderless and less of a threat. Dimitri would be free of this evil state, his soul finally able to move on to better places. And I would live (hopefully), having helped the world by killing more Strigoi.

I bumped against the windowsill and looked out. Nighttime—not good. The sheer side of the manor was not ideal for climbing, either. It could be done, but it would be time consuming. I didn't have any more time. Directly below the window was a thickly leafed bush of some sort. I couldn't see it clearly and only hoped it wasn't a rosebush or something equally sharp. A second floor drop wouldn't kill me, though. Probably wouldn't even hurt—much.

I climbed over the ledge, briefly meeting Dimitri's gaze as the other Strigoi moved in on him. The words came to me again: *Don't hesitate*. Dimitri's important lesson. But it hadn't been his first one. His first had been about what to do if I was outnumbered and out of options: *Run*.

Time for me to run.

I leapt out the window.

TWENTY-SIX

I THINK THE PROFANITIES THAT came out of my mouth when I hit the ground would have been understandable in any language. It *hurt*.

The bush was not particularly sharp or pointy, but it wasn't soft by any stretch of the imagination. It broke my fall somewhat, though it didn't save my ankle from twisting underneath me. "Shit!" I said through gritted teeth, climbing to my feet. Russia sure was making me swear a lot. I tested the weight on my ankle and felt a twinge of pain but nothing I couldn't stand on. A sprain, thank God. The ankle wasn't broken, and I'd had worse. Still, it was going to slow down my getaway.

I limped away from the bush, trying to pick up the pace and ignore the pain. Stretching before me was that stupid hedge maze I'd thought was so cool the other night. The sky was cloudy, but I doubted moonlight would have made it easier to navigate. No way was I going to fight that leafy mess. I'd find where it ended and get out through there.

Unfortunately, when I circled the house, I discovered an unhappy truth: The hedge was everywhere. It encircled the estate like some kind of medieval moat. The annoying part was, I doubted Galina had even had it installed for defense. She'd probably done it for the same reason she had crystal chandeliers and antique paintings in the hallways: It was cool.

Well, there was nothing for it, then. I picked an opening to the maze at random and started winding my way through. I had no idea where to go, no strategies for getting out. Shadows lurked everywhere, and I often didn't see dead ends coming until I was right on top of them. The bushes were tall enough that once I was only a little way into the maze, I completely lost sight of the top of the house. If I'd had it as a navigation point, I might have been able to just move in a straight (or nearly straight) line away.

Instead, I wasn't entirely sure if I was going backward or in circles or what. At one point, I was pretty sure I'd passed the same jasmine trellis three times. I tried to think of stories I'd read about people navigating mazes. What did they use? Bread crumbs? Thread? I didn't know, and as more time passed and my ankle grew sorer, I began to get discouraged. I'd killed a Strigoi in my weakened state but couldn't escape some bushes. Embarrassing, really.

"Roza!"

The voice carried distantly on the wind, and I stiffened. No. It couldn't be.

Dimitri. He'd survived.

"Roza, I know you're out there," he called. "I can smell you."

I had a feeling he was bluffing. He wasn't close enough for me to feel sick,

and with the cloying perfume of the flowers, I doubted he could scent me yet —even if I was sweating a lot. He was trying to bait me into giving up my location.

With new resolve, I headed down the next twist in the bushes, praying for the exit. *Okay, God,* I thought. *Get me out of this and I'll stop my half-assed churchgoing ways. You got me past a pack of Strigoi tonight. I mean, trapping that one between the doors really shouldn't have worked, so clearly you're on board. Let me get out of here, and I'll . . . I don't know. Donate Adrian's money to the poor. Get baptized. Join a convent. Well, no. Not that last one.*

Dimitri continued his taunting. "I won't kill you, not if you give yourself up. I owe you. You took out Galina for me, and now I'm in charge. Replacing her happened a little ahead of schedule, but that's not a problem. Of course, there aren't many people to control now that Nathan and the others are dead. But that can be fixed."

Unbelievable. He truly had survived those odds. I'd said it before and meant it: Alive or undead, the love of my life was a badass. There was no way he could have defeated those three . . . and yet, well . . . I'd seen him take on crazy odds before. And clearly his being here was proof of his capabilities.

The path ahead of me split, and I randomly chose the righthand path. It spread off into the darkness, and I breathed a sigh of relief. Score. Despite his breezy commentary, I knew he was also moving through the maze, getting closer and closer. And unlike me, he knew the paths and how to get out of it.

"I'm not upset about you attacking me, either. I would have done it in your place. It's just one more reason why we should be together."

My next turn took me into a dead end filled with climbing moonflowers. I kept my swearing to myself and backtracked.

"You're still dangerous, though. If I find you, I'm probably going to have to kill you. I don't want to, but I'm starting to think there's no way we can both live in this world. Come to me by choice, and I'll awaken you. We'll control Galina's empire together."

I almost laughed. I couldn't have found him if I wanted to in this mess. If I'd had that kind of ability, I'd—

My stomach swirled a little. Oh no. He was getting closer. Did he know it yet? I didn't fully understand how the amount of nausea correlated to distance, but it didn't matter. He was too close, period. How close did he need to be to truly smell me? To hear me walking on the grass? Each second brought him closer to success. Once he had my trail, I was screwed. My heart started racing even more—if that was even possible at this point—and the adrenaline pumping through me numbed my ankle, even though it still slowed me down.

Another dead end spun me around, and I tried to calm myself, knowing panic would make me sloppy. All the while, that nausea grew in increments.

"Even if you get out, where will you go?" he called. "We're in the middle of nowhere." His words were poison, seeping into my skin. If I focused on them, my fear would win, and I'd give up. I'd curl into a ball and let him come for me, and I had no reason to believe he'd let me live. My life could be over in the next few minutes.

A turn to my left led to another wall of glossy green leaves. I sidestepped it

quickly and headed in the opposite direction and saw—fields.

Long, vast stretches of grass spread out ahead of me, giving way to trees scattered off in the distance. Against all odds, I'd made it out. Unfortunately, the nausea was strong now. This close, he had to know where I was. I peered around, realizing the truth of his words. We really were in the middle of nowhere. Where could I go? I had no idea where we were.

There. To my left, I saw the faint purple glow on the horizon that I'd noticed the other night. I hadn't realized what it was then, but now I knew. Those were city lights, most likely Novosibirsk, if that was where Galina's gang did most of their deeds. Even if it wasn't Novosibirsk, it was civilization. There would be people there. Safety. I could get help.

I took off at as fast a run as I could manage, feet pounding hard against the ground. Even the adrenaline couldn't block that much impact out, and pain crackled up through my leg with each step. The ankle held, though. I didn't fall or go to a true limp. My breath was hard and ragged, the rest of my muscles still weak from all I'd been through. Even with a goal, I knew that the city was miles away.

And all the while, the nausea grew and grew. Dimitri was close. He had to be out of the maze now, but I couldn't risk looking back. I just kept running toward that purple glow on the horizon, even though it meant I was about to enter a cluster of trees. Maybe, maybe it would provide cover. *You're a fool,* some part of me whispered. *There's nowhere you can hide from him.*

I reached the thin line of trees and slowed just a little, gasping for breath and pressing myself up against a sturdy trunk. I finally dared a look behind me but saw nothing. The house glowed in the distance, surrounded by the darkness of the hedge maze. My sick stomach hadn't grown worse, so it was possible I might have a lead on him. The maze had several exits; he hadn't known where I'd come out.

My moment of respite over, I kept moving, keeping the soft glow of the city lights in sight through the branches. It was only a matter of time before Dimitri found me. My ankle wasn't going to let me do much more of this. Outrunning him was slowly becoming a fantasy. Leaves left over from last fall crunched as I moved, but I couldn't afford to step around them. I doubted I had to worry anymore about Dimitri sniffing me out. The noise would give me away.

"Rose! I swear it's not too late."

Shoot. His voice was close. I looked around frantically. I couldn't see him, but if he was still calling for me, he likely couldn't see me yet either. The city haze was still my guiding star, but there were trees and darkness between me and it. Suddenly, an unexpected person came to mind. Tasha Ozera. She was Christian's aunt, a very formidable lady who was one of the forerunners of teaching Moroi to fight back against Strigoi.

"We can retreat and retreat and let ourselves get backed into corners forever," she'd said once. "Or we can go out and meet the enemy at the time and place *we* choose. Not them."

Okay, Tasha, I thought. *Let's see if your advice gets me killed.*

I looked around and located a tree with branches I could reach. Shoving my stake back into my pocket, I grabbed hold of the lowest branch and swung

myself up. My ankle complained the whole way, but aside from that, there were enough branches for me to get good hand- and footholds. I kept going until I found a thick, heavy limb that I thought would support my weight. I moved out onto it, staying near the trunk and carefully testing the limb's sturdiness. It held. I took the stake out of my pocket and waited.

A minute or so later, I heard the faint stirring of leaves as Dimitri approached. He was much quieter than I had been. His tall, dark form came into view, a sinister shadow in the night. He moved very slowly, very carefully, eyes roving everywhere and the rest of his senses no doubt working as well.

"Roza . . ." He spoke softly. "I know you're here. You have no chance of running. No chance of hiding."

His gaze was fixed low. He thought I was hiding behind a tree or crouched down. A few more steps. That was all I needed from him. Against the stake, my hand began to sweat, but I couldn't wipe it off. I was frozen, holding so still that I didn't even dare breathe.

"Roza . . ."

The voice caressed my skin, cold and deadly. Still scrutinizing his surroundings, Dimitri took one step forward. Then another. And then another.

I think it occurred to him to look up the instant I jumped. My body slammed into his, knocking him to the ground back-first. He immediately tried to throw me off, just as I tried to drive the stake through his heart. Signs of fatigue and fighting were all over him. Defeating the other Strigoi had taken its toll, though I doubted I was in much better shape. We grappled, and once, I managed to rake the stake against his cheek. He snarled in pain but kept his chest well protected. Over it, I could see where I'd ripped his shirt the first time I'd staked him. The wound had already healed.

"You. Are. Amazing," he said, his words full of both pride and battle fury.

I had no energy for a response. My only goal was his heart. I fought to stay on him, and at last, my stake pierced his chest—but he was too fast. He knocked my hand away before I could fully drive the stake through. In the process, he knocked me off of him. I flew several feet away, mercifully not hitting any trees. I scrambled to my feet, dazed, and saw him coming toward me. He was fast—but not as fast as he'd been in previous fights. We were going to kill ourselves in trying to kill each other.

I'd lost my advantage now, so I ran off into the trees, knowing he'd be right behind me. I was certain he could outrun me, but if I could accrue just a tiny lead, then maybe I could secure another good attack place and try to—

"Ahhh!"

My scream rang into the night, jarring against the quiet darkness. My foot had gone out from under me, and I was sliding rapidly down a steep hillside, unable to stop myself. There were few trees, but the rocks and my ungainly position made the fall painful, particularly since I was wearing that sweaterdress. How I managed to keep holding the stake was beyond me. I hit the bottom roughly, managed to briefly stand, and then promptly stumbled and fell—into water.

I stared around. On cue, the moon peeked out from the clouds, casting enough light to show me a huge expanse of black, fast-moving water in front

of me. I gaped at it, utterly confused, and then I turned in the direction of the city. This was the Ob, the river that ran through Novosibirsk. The river headed right toward it. Glancing behind me, I saw Dimitri standing on top of the ridge. Unlike some of us, he'd apparently been watching where he was going. Either that, or my scream had tipped him off that something was amiss.

It was going to take him less than a minute to come running down after me, though. I looked to either side of me and then in front. Okay. Fast-moving water. Possibly deep. Very wide. It'd take the pressure off my ankle, but I wasn't thrilled about my chances of not drowning. In legends, vampires couldn't cross running water. Man, I wished. That was pure myth.

I did a double take to my left and just barely saw a dark shape over the water. A bridge? It was the best shot I had. I hesitated before going toward it; I needed Dimitri to start coming down here. I was not going to run off and let him pace me up above on the ridge. I needed the time his hill descent would buy me. There. He took one step onto the slope, and I tore off down the shore, not looking back. The bridge grew closer and closer to me, and as it did, I realized just how high it was. I'd misjudged it from where I'd landed. The slopes around the bridge reached farther up the more I ran downriver. I was going to have a hell of a climb.

No problem. I'd worry about that later—by which I meant in about thirty seconds, since that was probably how long it'd take Dimitri to catch up with me. As it was, I could hear his feet splashing through the shallow water on the bank, the sounds growing nearer and nearer. If I could just reach the bridge, if I could just get to high ground and to the other side—

The nausea surged in me. A hand closed around the back of my jacket, jerking me backward. I fell against Dimitri and immediately began fighting him, trying to free myself. But God, I was so, so tired. Every piece of me hurt, and no matter how weary he was, I was worse.

"Stop it!" he yelled, gripping my arms. "Don't you get it? You can't win!"

"Then kill me!" I wriggled, but his hold on my upper arms was too strong, and even holding the stake, I couldn't do anything with it. "You said you would if I didn't surrender myself. Well, guess what? I didn't. I won't. So just get it over with."

That phantom moonlight lit up his face, eradicating the normal shadows and making his skin stark white against the night's backdrop. It was like all the colors in the world had been blanked out. His eyes merely looked dark, but in my mind's eye, they glowed like fire. His expression was cold and calculating.

Not my Dimitri.

"It'd take a lot for me to kill you, Rose," he said. "This isn't enough."

I wasn't convinced. Still holding onto me with that unbreakable grip, he leaned toward me. He was going to bite me. Those teeth would pierce my skin, and he'd turn me into a monster like him or drink until I was dead. Either way, I'd be too drugged and too stupid to know it. The person who was Rose Hathaway would leave this world without even realizing it.

Pure panic shot through me—even as that part of me that was still in withdrawal cried out for more of those glorious endorphins. No, no. I couldn't allow that. Every nerve I had was set on fire, ramping up for defense, attack,

anything . . . anything to stop this. I would not be turned. I *could not* be turned. I wanted so badly to do something to save myself. My whole being was consumed with that urge. I could feel it ready to burst out, ready to—

My hands could touch each other but not Dimitri. With a bit of maneuvering, I used the fingers of my left hand to pry off Oksana's ring. It slipped off and into the mud, just as Dimitri's fangs touched my skin.

It was like a nuclear explosion going off. The ghosts and spirits I'd summoned on the road to Baia burst between us. They were all around, translucent and luminescent in shades of pale green, blue, yellow, and silver. I'd let loose all of my defenses, let myself succumb to my emotions in a way I hadn't been able to when Dimitri first caught me. The ring's healing power had barely kept me in check just now, but it was gone. I had no barriers on my power.

Dimitri sprang back, wide-eyed. Like the Strigoi on the road, he waved his hands around, swatting the spirits as one would mosquitoes. His hands passed right through them, ineffectual. Their attack was more or less ineffectual too. They couldn't physically hurt him, but they could affect the mind, and they were damned distracting. What had Mark said? The dead hate the undead. And from the way these ghosts swarmed Dimitri, it was clear that they did.

I stepped back, scanning the ground below me. There. The ring's silver gleamed up at me from a puddle. I reached down and grabbed it, then ran off and left Dimitri to his fate. He wasn't exactly screaming, but he was making some horrible noises. That tore at me, but I kept going, running toward the bridge. I reached it a minute or so later. It was as high as I'd feared, but it was sturdy and well built, if narrow. It was the kind of country bridge that only one car at a time could cross.

"I've come this far," I muttered, staring up at the bank. It was not only higher than the one I'd fallen down, it was also steeper. I pocketed the ring and stake and then reached out, digging my hands into the ground. I was going to have to half-crawl, half-climb this one. My ankle got a slight reprieve; this was all upper-body strength now. As I climbed, however, I began to notice something. Faint flashes in my periphery. An impression of faces and skulls. And a throbbing pain in the back of my head.

Oh no. This had happened before too. In this panicked state, I couldn't maintain the defenses I usually did to keep the dead away from *myself*. They were now approaching me, more curious than belligerent. But as their numbers grew, it all became as disorienting as what Dimitri was now experiencing.

They couldn't hurt me, but they were freaking me out, and the telltale headache that came with them was starting to make me dizzy. Glancing back toward him, I saw something amazing. Dimitri was *still* coming. He really was a god, a god who brought death closer with each footstep. The ghosts still swarmed him like a cloud, yet he was managing progress, one agonizing step at a time. Turning back, I continued my climb, ignoring my own glowing companions as best I could.

At long last, I reached the top of the bank and stumbled onto the bridge. I could barely stand, my muscles were so weak. I made it a few more steps and then collapsed to my hands and knees. More and more spirits were spinning

around, and my head was on the verge of exploding. Dimitri still made his slow progress but was a ways from the bank yet. I tried to stand again, using the bridge's rails for support, and failed. The rough grating on the bridge scraped my bare legs.

"Damn."

I knew what I had to do to save myself, though it could very well end up killing me, too. With trembling hands, I reached into my pocket and pulled out the ring. I shook so badly that I felt certain I'd drop it. Somehow, I held on and managed to slide it onto my finger. A small surge of warmth radiated from it into me, and I felt a tiny bit of control settle into my body. Unfortunately, the ghosts were still there.

The traces of that fear, of dying or turning Strigoi, were still in me, but it had lessened now that I was out of immediate danger. Feeling less unstable, I sought for the barriers and control I usually kept up, desperate to slam them into place and drive my visitors away.

"Go, go, go," I whispered, squeezing my eyes shut. The effort was like pushing on a mountain, an impossible obstacle that no one could have the strength for. This was what Mark had warned about, why I shouldn't do this. The dead were a powerful asset, but once called, they were difficult to get rid of. What had he said? Those who danced on the edge of darkness and insanity shouldn't risk this.

"Go!" I shouted, throwing my last bit of strength into the effort.

One by one, the phantoms around me vanished. I felt my world settle back into its rightful order. Only, when I looked down, I saw that the ghosts had left Dimitri too—as I'd suspected. And just like that, he was on the move again.

"Damn." My word of the night.

I managed to get on my feet this time as he sprinted up the slope. Again, he was slower than usual—but still more than fast enough. I began backing up, never taking my eyes off of him. Getting rid of the ghosts had given me more strength, but not what I needed to get away. Dimitri had won.

"Another shadow-kissed effect?" he asked, stepping onto the bridge.

"Yeah." I swallowed. "Turns out ghosts don't much like Strigoi."

"You didn't seem to like them much either."

I took another slow step backward. Where could I go? As soon as I turned around to run, he'd be on me.

"So, did I go far enough for you to not want to turn me?" I asked as cheerfully as I could manage.

He gave me a wry, twisted smile. "No. Your shadow-kissed abilities have their uses. . . . Too bad they'll go away when you're awakened." So. That was still his plan. In spite of how much I'd infuriated him, he still wanted to keep me around for eternity.

"You're not going to awaken me," I said.

"Rose, there's no way you can—"

"No."

I climbed up onto the railing of the bridge, swinging one leg over. I knew what had to happen now. He froze.

"What are you doing?"

"I told you. I'll die before I become Strigoi. I won't be like you or the others. I don't want that. You didn't want that, once upon a time." My face felt cold as a night breeze blew over it, the result of stealthy tears on my cheeks.

I swung my other leg over and peered down at the swiftly moving water. We were a lot more than two stories up. I'd hit the water hard, and even if I survived that fall, I didn't have the strength to outswim the current and get to shore. As I stared down, contemplating my death, I thought back to when Dimitri and I sat in the backseat of an SUV once, discussing this very topic.

It was the first time we'd sat near each other, and every place our bodies touched had been warm and wonderful. He'd smelled good—that scent, that scent of being *alive* was gone now, I realized—and he'd been more relaxed than usual, ready to smile. We'd talked about what it meant to be alive and in full control of your soul—and what it meant to become one of the undead, to lose the love and light of life and all those you'd known. We'd looked at each other and agreed death was better than that fate.

Looking at Dimitri now, I had to agree.

"Rose, don't." I heard true panic in his voice. If he lost me over the edge, I was gone. No Strigoi. No awakening. For me to be turned, he needed to kill me by drinking my blood and then feed blood back to me. If I jumped, the water would kill me, not bloodletting. I would be long dead before he found me in the river.

"Please," he begged. There was a plaintive note to his voice, one that startled me. It twisted my heart. It reminded me too much of the living Dimitri, the one who wasn't a monster. The one who'd cared for me and loved me, who'd believed in me and made love to me. This Dimitri, the one who was none of those things, took two careful steps forward, then stopped again. "We need to be together."

"Why?" I asked softly. The word was carried away on the wind, but he heard.

"Because I want you."

I gave him a sad smile, wondering if we'd meet again in the land of the dead. "Wrong answer," I told him.

I let go.

And he was right there, sprinting out to me with that insane Strigoi speed as I started to fall. He reached out and caught one of my arms, dragging me back onto the railing. Well, half-dragging. Only part of me made it over; the rest still hung out over the river.

"Stop fighting me!" he said, trying to pull on the arm he held.

He was in a precarious position himself, straddling the rail as he tried to lean over far enough to get me and actually hold onto me.

"Let go of me!" I yelled back.

But he was too strong and managed to haul most of me over the rail, enough so that I wasn't in total danger of falling again.

See, here's the thing. In that moment before I let go, I really had been contemplating my death. I'd come to terms with it and accepted it. I also, however, had known Dimitri might do something exactly like this. He was just that fast and that good. That was why I was holding my stake in the hand that was dangling free.

I looked him in the eye. “I will always love you.”

Then I plunged the stake into his chest.

It wasn’t as precise a blow as I would have liked, not with the skilled way he was dodging. I struggled to get the stake in deep enough to his heart, unsure if I could do it from this angle. Then, his struggles stopped. His eyes stared at me, stunned, and his lips parted, almost into a smile, albeit a grisly and pained one.

“That’s what I was supposed to say. . . .” he gasped out.

Those were his last words.

His failed attempt to dodge the stake had made him lose his balance on the edge. The stake’s magic made the rest easy, stunning him and his reflexes.

Dimitri fell.

He nearly took me with him, and I just barely managed to break free of him and cling to the railing. He dropped down into the darkness—down, down into the blackness of the Ob. A moment later he disappeared from sight.

I stared down after him, wondering if I would see him in the water if I squinted hard enough. But I didn’t. The river was too dark and too far away. Clouds moved back over the moon, and darkness fell over everything again. For a moment, staring down and realizing what I’d just done, I wanted to throw myself in after him, because surely there was no way I could go on living now.

You have to. My inner voice was much calmer and more confident than it should have been. *The old Dimitri would want you to live. If you really loved him, then you have to go on.*

With a shaking breath, I climbed over the rail and stood back on the bridge, surprisingly grateful for its security. I didn’t know how I would go on living, but I knew that I wanted to. I wasn’t going to feel fully safe until I was on solid ground, and with my body falling apart, I began to cross the bridge one step at a time. When I was on the other side, I had a choice. Follow the river or the road? They veered off from each other slightly, but both headed roughly in the direction of the city’s lights. I opted for the road. I didn’t want to be anywhere near the river. I would not think about what had just happened. I *couldn’t* think about it. My brain refused. *Worry about staying alive first. Then worry about how you’re going to live.*

The road, while clearly rural, was flat and packed and made for easy walking—for anyone else. A light rain began falling, which just added insult to injury. I kept wanting to sit and rest, to curl up in a ball and think of nothing else. *No, no, no*. The light. I had to go toward the light. That almost made me laugh out loud. It was funny, really. Like I was someone having a near-death experience. Then I did laugh. This whole night had been full of near-death experiences. This was the least of them.

It was also the last, and as much as I longed for the city, it was too far away. I’m not sure how long I walked before I finally had to stop and sit. *Just a minute,* I decided. I’d rest for a minute and then keep moving. I *had* to keep moving. If by some crazy chance I’d missed his heart, Dimitri could be climbing out of the river at any moment. Or other surviving Strigoi could be coming after me from the manor.

But I didn’t get up in a minute. I think I may have slept, and I honestly don’t

know how long I'd been sitting there when headlights suddenly spurred me to alertness. A car slowed down and came to a stop. I managed to get to my feet, bracing myself.

No Strigoi got out. Instead, an old human man did. He peered at me and said something in Russian. I shook my head and backed up a step. He leaned into the car and said something, and a moment later, an older woman joined him. She looked at me and her eyes widened, face compassionate. She said something gentle-sounding and held out her hand to me, cautious in the way one would be when approaching a feral animal. I stared at her for several heavy seconds and then pointed at the purple horizon.

"Novosibirsk," I said.

She followed my gesture and nodded. "Novosibirsk." She pointed to me and then to the car. "Novosibirsk."

I hesitated a little longer and then let her lead me into the backseat. She took off her coat and laid it over me, and I noticed then that I was soaked from the rain. I had to be a mess after everything I'd been through tonight. It was a wonder they'd even stopped. The old man began driving again, and it occurred to me I could have just gotten in a car with serial killers. But then, how would that be any different from the rest of my night?

The mental and physical pain were starting to drag me under, and with my last effort, I wet my lips and choked out another gem from my Russian vocabulary.

"*Pazvaneet*?"

The woman looked back at me in surprise. I wasn't sure if I had the word right. I might have just asked for a pay phone instead of a cell phone—or maybe I'd asked for a giraffe—but hopefully the message came through regardless. A moment later, she reached into her purse and handed me a cell phone. Even in Siberia, everyone was wired. With shaking hands, I dialed the number I now had memorized. A female voice answered.

"*Alló*."

"Sydney? This is Rose. . . ."

TWENTY-SEVEN

I DIDN'T RECOGNIZE THE GUY Sydney sent to meet us when we reached Novosibirsk, but he had the same golden tattoo that she did. He was sandy-haired and in his thirties—and human, of course. He looked competent and trustworthy, and as I leaned against the car, he laughed and spoke to the elderly couple like they'd been best friends forever. There was a professional and reassuring air about him, and soon they were smiling too. I'm not sure what he told them, maybe that I was his wayward daughter or something, but they apparently felt good enough to leave me in his hands. I supposed with their jobs, the Alchemist charm in action.

When the old man and woman drove off, his demeanor shifted slightly. He didn't seem as cold as Sydney initially had, but there was no laughing or joking with me. He'd become distinctly businesslike, and I couldn't help but think of the stories of men in black, the people who cleaned up after extraterrestrial encounters in order to keep the world ignorant of the truth.

"Can you walk?" he asked, eyeing me up and down.

"Unclear at this time," I replied.

It turned out I could, just not very well. With his help, I eventually ended up at a town house over in a residential part of the city. I was bleary-eyed and barely able to stay on my feet by that point. There were other people there, but none of them registered. The only thing that mattered was the bedroom someone took me to. I mustered enough strength at that point to break free of the arm supporting me and do a face-plant right in the middle of the bed. I fell asleep instantly.

I awoke to bright sunshine filling my room and voices speaking in hushed tones. Considering everything that I'd been through, I wouldn't have been surprised to see Dimitri, Tatiana, or even Dr. Olendzki from the Academy there. Instead, it was Abe's bearded face that looked down at me, the light making all of his jewelry gleam.

For a moment, his face blurred, and all I saw was dark, dark water—water that threatened to wash me away. Dimitri's last words echoed in my head: *That's what I was supposed to say. . . .* He'd understood that I wanted to hear that he loved me. What would have happened if we'd had a few moments more? Would he have said those words? Would he have meant them? And would it have mattered?

With the same resolve I'd mustered before, I parted the waters swirling in my mind, ordering myself to push aside last night as long as I could. I would drown if I thought about it. Now I had to swim. Abe's face came back into

focus.

"Greetings, Zmey," I said weakly. Somehow, him being here didn't surprise me. Sydney would have had to tell her superiors about me, who in turn would have told Abe. "Nice of you to slither on in."

He shook his head, wearing a rueful smile. "I think you've outdone me when it comes to sneaking around dark corners. I thought you were on your way back to Montana."

"Next time, make sure you write a few more details into your bargains. Or just pack me up and send me back to the U.S. for real."

"Oh," he said, "that's exactly what I intend to do." He kept smiling as he said it, but somehow, I had a feeling he wasn't joking. And suddenly, I no longer feared that fate. Going home was starting to sound good.

Mark and Oksana walked over to stand beside him. Their presence was unexpected but welcome. They smiled too, faces melancholy but relieved. I sat up in bed, surprised I could move at all.

"You healed me," I said to Oksana. "I still hurt, but I don't feel like I'm going to die, which I have to think is an improvement."

She nodded. "I did enough to make sure you weren't in immediate danger. I figured I could do the rest when you woke up."

I shook my head. "No, no. I'll recover on my own." I always hated it when Lissa healed me. I didn't want her wasting the strength on me. I also didn't want her inviting spirit's side effects.

Lissa . . .

I jerked the covers off of me. "Oh my God! I have to get home. Right now."

Immediately, three pairs of arms blocked my way.

"Hold on," said Mark. "You aren't going anywhere. Oksana only healed you a little. You're a long way from being recovered."

"And you still haven't told us what happened," said Abe, eyes as shrewd as ever. He was someone who needed to know everything, and the mysteries around me probably drove him crazy.

"There's no time! Lissa's in trouble. I have to get back to school." It was all coming back to me. Lissa's erratic behavior and crazy stunts, driven by some kind of compulsion—or super-compulsion, I supposed, seeing as Avery had been able to shove me out of Lissa's head.

"Oh, now you want to go back to Montana?" exclaimed Abe. "Rose, even if there was a plane waiting for you out in the other room, that's a twenty-hour trip, at minimum. And you're in no condition to go anywhere."

I shook my head, still trying to get on my feet. After what I'd faced last night, this group wasn't that much of a threat—well, maybe Mark was—but I could hardly start throwing punches. And yeah, I still wasn't sure what Abe could do.

"You don't get it! Someone's trying to kill Lissa or hurt her or . . ."

Well, I didn't really understand *what* Avery wanted. All I knew was that Avery had somehow been compelling Lissa to do all sorts of reckless things. She had to be amazingly strong in spirit to not only manage those feats but also keep it hidden from Lissa and Adrian. She'd even created a false aura to hide her golden one. I had no idea how that magnitude of power was possible, particularly considering that Avery's fun-loving personality could hardly be

called insane. Whatever her scheme, Lissa was at risk. I had to do something.

Removing Abe from the equation, I looked up at Mark and Oksana pleadingly. “It’s my bondmate,” I explained. “She’s in trouble. Someone’s trying to hurt her. I have to go to her—you understand why I have to.”

And I saw in their faces that they *did* understand. I also knew that in my situation, they’d try exactly the same thing for each other.

Mark sighed.“Rose . . . we’ll help you get to her, but we can’t do it *now*.”

“We’ll contact the school,” said Abe matter-of-factly. “They’ll take care of it.”

Right. And how exactly would we do that? Call up Headmaster Lazar and tell him his party-girl daughter was actually corrupting and controlling people with psychic powers and that she needed to be locked up for Lissa’s and everyone else’s good?

My lack of an answer seemed to make them think they’d convinced me, Abe in particular. “With Oksana’s help, you’d probably be in good enough condition to leave tomorrow,” he added. “I can book a morning flight the next day.”

“Will she be all right until then?” Oksana asked me gently.

“I . . . I don’t know . . .” What could Avery do in two days’ time? Alienate and embarrass Lissa further? Horrible things, but not permanent or life threatening. Surely, surely . . . she’d be okay that long, right? “Let me see. . . .”

I saw Mark’s eyes widen slightly as he realized what I was about to do. Then I saw nothing in the room anymore because I was no longer there. I was in Lissa’s head. A new set of sights settled in around me, and for half a second, I thought I stood on the bridge again and was looking down into black waters and a cold death.

Then I gained a grip on what I saw—or rather, what Lissa saw. She was standing on the ledge of a window in some building on campus. It was nighttime. I couldn’t tell offhand which building it was, but it didn’t matter. Lissa was on what appeared to be the sixth floor, standing there in high heels, laughing about something while the dark ground threatened below. Behind her, I heard Avery’s voice.

“Lissa, be careful! You shouldn’t be up there.”

But it had the same double meaning that permeated everything Avery did. Even as she said those words of caution, I could feel a reckless drive within Lissa, something telling her that it was okay to be where she was and not to worry so much. It was Avery’s compulsion. Then, I felt that brushing of my mind, and the annoyed voice.

You again?

I was forced back out, back to the bedroom in Novosibirsk. Abe was freaking out, apparently thinking I’d gone into some catatonic fit, and Mark and Oksana were attempting to explain to him what had happened. I blinked and rubbed my head as I gathered myself, and Mark breathed a sigh of relief.

“It’s much stranger watching someone do that than it is doing it myself.”

“She’s in trouble,” I said, attempting to get up again. “She’s in trouble . . . and I don’t know what to do. . . .”

They were right in saying there was no way on earth I could get to Lissa

anytime soon. And even if I followed Abe's suggestion and contacted the school . . . I didn't know for sure where Lissa was at or even if anyone there would believe me. I thought about jumping back in and trying to read Lissa's location from her mind, but Avery would likely throw me out again. From what I had briefly felt, Lissa didn't have her cell phone on her—no surprise. There were strict rules about having them in classes, so she usually left hers in her dorm room.

But I knew someone who would have his. And who would believe me.

"Does anyone have a phone?" I asked.

Abe gave me his, and I dialed Adrian's number, surprised I had it memorized. Adrian was mad at me, but he cared about Lissa. He would help her, no matter his grudge toward me. *And* he would believe me when I tried to explain a crazy, spirit-induced plot.

But when the other end of the line picked up, it was his voicemail that answered, not the man himself. "I know how devastated you must be to miss me," his cheery voice said, "but leave a message, and I'll try to ease your agony as soon as possible."

I disconnected, feeling lost. Suddenly, I looked up at Oksana as one of my crazier ideas came to mind.

"You . . . you can do that thing . . . where you actively go in someone's mind and touch their thoughts, right? Like you did to me?"

She grimaced slightly. "Yes, but it's not something I like to do. I don't think it's right."

"Can you compel them once you're in there?"

She looked even more disgusted. "Well, yes, of course . . . the two things are actually very similar. But reaching in someone's mind is one thing and forcing them into some unwanted behavior is an entirely different matter."

"My friend is about to do something dangerous," I said. "It could kill her. She's being compelled, but I can't do anything about it. The bond won't let me actively reach her. I can only watch. If you could reach inside my friend's head and compel her out of danger . . ."

Oksana shook her head. "Supposing morals weren't an issue, I can't reach into someone who's not actually here—let alone someone I've never met."

I raked a hand through my hair, panic setting in. I wished Oksana knew how to walk dreams. That would at least give her the long-distance capability. All of these spirit powers seemed to be one off from each other, each having some additional nuance. Someone who could dream walk might be able to take the next step and visit someone awake.

An even crazier idea came to me. This was a groundbreaking day. "Oksana . . . you can reach into my mind, right?"

"Yes," she reaffirmed.

"If I . . . if I was in my bondmate's head at the time, could you reach into me and *then* reach into her mind? Could I, like, be the link between you guys?"

"I've never heard of anything like that," murmured Mark.

"That's because we've never had this many spirit users and shadow-kissed around before," I pointed out.

Abe, understandably, looked completely lost.

A shadow fell over Oksana's face. "I don't know. . . ."

"Either it works or it doesn't," I said. "If it doesn't, then there's no harm done. But if you can reach her through me . . . you can compel her." She started to speak, and I cut her off. "I know, I know . . . you think it's wrong. But this other spirit user? *She's* the one who's wrong. All you have to do is compel Lissa out of danger. She's ready to jump out a window! Stop her now; then I'll get to her in another day or so and fix things."

And by fix things, I meant ruin Avery's pretty face with a black eye.

In my bizarre life, I'd grown pretty used to people—especially adults—rejecting my outlandish ideas and proclamations. I'd had a hell of a time convincing people that Victor had kidnapped Lissa and an equally hard time making the guardians believe the school was under attack. So when situations like this happened, part of me almost expected resistance. But the thing was, as stable as they were, Oksana and Mark had been fighting with spirit for most of their lives. Crazy was kind of par for the course for them, and after a moment, she didn't argue any further.

"All right," she said. "Give me your hands."

"What's going on?" asked Abe, still totally clueless. I took a small amount of satisfaction in seeing him out of his league for a change.

Mark murmured something to Oksana in Russian and kissed her on the cheek. He was warning her to be careful, not condemning her for her choice. I knew he'd want the same thing if she were in Lissa's place. The love that flashed between them was so deep and so strong that I nearly lost my resolve to do this. That kind of love reminded me of Dimitri, and if I allowed myself to think about him for even a moment more, I was going to relive last night. . . .

I clasped Oksana's hands, a knot of fear coiling in my stomach. I didn't like the idea of someone being in my head, even though that was a hypocritical sentiment for someone who was constantly traveling into her best friend's mind. Oksana gave me a small smile, though it was obvious she was as nervous as me.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I hate doing this to people. . . ."

And then I felt it, the same thing that had happened when Avery pushed me out. It was like the actual physical sensation of someone touching my brain. I gasped, looking into Oksana's eyes as waves of heat and cold ran through me. Oksana was in my head.

"Now go to your friend," she said.

I did. I focused my thoughts into Lissa and found her still standing on the window's ledge. Better she was there than on the ground, but I still wanted her off and back in the room before something bad happened. That wasn't for me to do, however. I was the taxi, so to speak. Oksana was the one who had to literally talk Lissa off the ledge. Only I had no indication the other woman had come with me. When I'd jumped to Lissa's mind, I'd lost that sense of Oksana. No more tickling of the mind.

Oksana? I thought. *Are you there?*

There was no response—not from Oksana, at least. The answer came from a very unexpected source.

Rose?

It was Lissa's voice that spoke in my mind. She froze her position in the

window and abruptly cut off whatever she'd been laughing about with Avery. I felt Lissa's terror and confusion as she wondered if she was imagining me. She peered around the room, her eyes passing over Avery. Avery recognized something was going on, and her face hardened. I felt the familiar sense of her presence in Lissa's mind and wasn't surprised when Avery tried to shove me out again.

Except—it didn't work.

Avery kicking me out in the past had always felt like an actual shove. I got the impression that when she tried it now, it felt like hitting a brick wall to her. I wasn't so easy to push around anymore. Oksana was with me somehow, lending her strength. Avery was still in Lissa's line of sight, and I saw those adorable blue-gray eyes go wide with shock that she couldn't control me.

Oh, I thought. *It's on, bitch!*

Rose? Lissa's voice was there again. *Am I going crazy?*

Not yet. But you have to get down, right now. I think Avery's trying to kill you.

Kill me? I could feel and hear Lissa's incredulity. *She'd never do that.*

Look, let's not argue it for now. Just get out of the window and call it good.

I felt the impulse in Lissa, felt her shift and start to put one foot down. Then it was like some core part of her self stopped her. Her foot stayed where it was . . . and slowly began to grow unsteady. . . .

That was Avery at work. I wondered if Oksana, lurking in the background of this bond, could overpower that compulsion. No, Oksana wasn't active here. Her spirit powers had somehow gotten *me* into actively communicating with Lissa, but she was remaining passive. I'd expected to be the bridge and thought Oksana would jump to Lissa's mind and compel her. The situation was reversed, though, and I didn't actually have compulsion powers. All I had was legendary wit and powers of persuasion.

Lissa, you have to fight Avery, I said. *She's a spirit user, and she's compelling you. You're one of the strongest compulsion users I know. You should be able to fight her.*

Fear answered me. *I can't . . . I can't compel right now.*

Why not?

Because I've been drinking.

I mentally groaned. Of course. That was why Avery was always so quick to supply Lissa with alcohol. It numbed spirit, as demonstrated in Adrian's frequent indulgences. Avery had encouraged the drinking so that Lissa's spirit abilities would weaken and give her less resistance. There were a number of times Lissa hadn't been able to gauge exactly how much Avery was drinking; in retrospect, Avery must have been doing a fair amount of faking.

Then use ordinary willpower, I told her. *It's possible to resist compulsion.*

It was true. Compulsion wasn't an automatic ticket to world domination. Some people were better at resisting it than others, though a Strigoi or spirit user certainly complicated matters.

I felt Lissa build up her resolve, felt her repeat my words over and over, that she had to be strong and step back off the ledge. She worked to push away that impulse Avery had implanted, and without knowing how, I suddenly found myself pushing on it as well. Lissa and I joined our strength together and started shoving Avery out.

In the physical world, Avery and Lissa's gazes were locked as the psychic struggle continued. Avery's face showed hard concentration that suddenly became overlaid with shock. She'd noticed me fighting her too. Her eyes narrowed, and when she spoke, it was me she addressed and not Lissa.

"Oh," Avery hissed, "you do *not* want to mess with me."

Didn't I?

There was a rush of heat and that feeling of someone reaching into my mind. Only it wasn't Oksana. It was Avery, and she was doing some serious investigation of my thoughts and memories. I understood now what Oksana meant about it being invasive and a violation. It wasn't just looking through someone's eyes; it was spying on their most intimate thoughts.

And then, the world around me dissolved. I stood in a room I didn't recognize. For a moment, I thought I was back in Galina's estate. It certainly had that rich, expensive feel to it. But no. After a moment's examination, I realized this wasn't the same at all. The furnishings were different. Even the vibe was different. Galina's home had been beautiful, but there had been a cold, impersonal feel to it. This place was inviting and clearly well loved. The plush couch had a quilt thrown haphazardly in its corner, as though someone —or maybe two someones—had been cuddling underneath it. And while the room wasn't messy, exactly, there were scattered objects—books, framed photos—that indicated this room was actually used and wasn't just for show.

I walked over to a small bookshelf and picked up one of the framed photos. I nearly dropped it when I saw what it was. It was a picture of Dimitri and me —but I had no memory of it. We stood arm in arm, leaning our faces together to make sure we both got in the shot. I was grinning broadly, and he too wore a joyous smile, one I'd hardly ever seen on him. It softened some of the protective fierceness that usually filled his features and made him look sexier than I'd ever imagined. A piece of that soft brown hair had slipped his ponytail and lay on his cheek. Beyond us was a city that I immediately recognized: Saint Petersburg. I frowned. No, this was definitely a picture that couldn't exist.

I was still studying it when I heard someone walk into the room. When I saw who it was, my heart stopped. I set the photo back on the shelf with shaking hands and took a few steps back.

It was Dimitri.

He wore jeans and a casual red T-shirt that fit the lean muscles of his body perfectly. His hair was down loose and slightly damp, like he'd just gotten out of the shower. He held two mugs and chuckled when he saw me.

"Still not dressed?" he asked, shaking his head. "They're going to be here any minute."

I looked down and saw that I wore plaid flannel pajama bottoms and a tank top. He handed me the mug, and I was too stunned to do anything but take it. I peered into it—hot chocolate—and then looked up at him. There was no red in his eyes, no evil on his face. Only gorgeous warmth and affection. He was my Dimitri, the one who'd loved and protected me. The one with a pure heart and soul..

"Who . . . who's coming?" I asked.

"Lissa and Christian. They're coming for brunch." He gave me a puzzled

look. “Are you okay?”

I looked around, again taking in the comforting room. Through a window, I saw a backyard filled with trees and flowers. Sunshine spilled through onto the carpet. I turned back to him and shook my head. “What is this? Where are we?”

His confused expression now turned into a frown. Stepping forward, he took my mug and set his and mine on the shelf. His hands rested on my hips, and I flinched but didn’t break away—how could I when he looked so much like my Dimitri?

“This is our house,” he said, drawing me near. “In Pennsylvania.”

“Pennsylvania . . . are we at the Royal Court?”

He shrugged. “A few miles away.”

I slowly shook my head. “No . . . that’s not possible. We can’t have a home together. And definitely not so close to the others. They’d never let us.” If in some crazy world Dimitri and I lived together, we’d have to do it in secret—somewhere remote, like Siberia.

“You insisted,” he said with a small smile. “And none of them care. They accept it. Besides, you said we *had* to live near Lissa.”

My mind reeled. What was going on? How was this possible? How could I be living with Dimitri—especially so near Moroi? This wasn’t right . . . and yet, it felt right. Looking around, I could see how this was my home. I could feel the love in it, feel the connection Dimitri and I had to it. But . . . how could I actually be with Dimitri? Wasn’t I supposed to be doing something else? Wasn’t I supposed to be *somewhere* else?

“You’re a Strigoi,” I said at last. “No . . . you’re dead. I killed you.”

He ran a finger along my cheek, still giving me that rueful smile. “Do I look like I’m dead? Do I look Strigoi?”

No. He looked wonderful and sexy and strong. He was all the things I remembered, all the things I loved. “But you were . . .” I trailed off, still confused. This wasn’t right. There was something I had to do, but I still couldn’t remember. “What happened?”

His hand returned to my hip, and he pulled me into a tight embrace. “You saved me,” he murmured into my ear. “Your love saved me, Roza. You brought me back so that we could be together.”

Had I? I had no memory of that, either. But this all seemed so real, and it felt so wonderful. I’d missed his arms around me. He’d held me as a Strigoi, but it had never felt like this. And when he leaned down and kissed me, I knew for sure he wasn’t a Strigoi. I didn’t know how I could have ever deluded myself back at Galina’s. This kiss was alive. It burned within my soul, and as my lips pressed more eagerly into his, I felt that connection, the one that told me there was no one else in the world for me except him.

Only, I couldn’t shake the feeling that I wasn’t supposed to be here. But where was I supposed to be? Lissa . . . something with Lissa . . .

I broke the kiss but not the embrace. My head rested against his chest. “I really saved you?”

“Your love was too strong. *Our* love was too strong. Not even the undead could keep us apart.”

I wanted to believe it. Desperately. But that voice still nagged in my head. .

. . Lissa. What about Lissa? Then, it came to me. Lissa and Avery. I had to save Lissa from Avery. I jerked away from Dimitri, and he stared in surprise.

"What are you doing?"

"This isn't real," I said. "This is a trick. You're still Strigoi. We can't be together—not here, not among the Moroi."

"Of course we can." There was hurt in his deep brown eyes, and it tore at my heart. "Don't you want to be with me?"

"I have to go back to Lissa. . . ."

"Let her go," he said, approaching me again. "Let all of it go. Stay here with me—we can have everything we ever wanted, Rose. We can be together every day, wake up together every morning."

"No." I stepped further back. I knew if I didn't, he would kiss me again, and then I'd truly be lost. Lissa needed me. Lissa was trapped. With each passing second, the details about Avery were coming back to me. This was all an illusion.

"Rose?" he asked. There was so much pain in his voice. "What are you doing?"

"I'm sorry," I said, feeling on the verge of tears. Lissa. I had to get to Lissa. "This isn't real. You're gone. You and I can never be together, but I can still help her."

"You love her more than me?"

Lissa had asked me almost the same thing when I'd left to hunt Dimitri. My life was doomed to always be about choosing between them.

"I love you both," I replied.

And with that, I used all of my will to push myself back to Lissa, wherever she was, and tear away from this fantasy. Honestly, I could have spent the rest of my days in that make-believe world, being with Dimitri in that house, waking up with him each morning like he'd said. But it wasn't real. It was too easy, and if I was learning anything, it was that life wasn't easy.

The effort was excruciating, but suddenly, I found myself looking back at the room at St. Vladimir's. I focused on Avery who was staring me and Lissa down. She'd pulled out the memory that tormented me most, attempting to confuse me and tear me from Lissa with a fantasy of what I wanted more than anything else in the world. I'd fought Avery's mind trap and felt pretty smug about it—despite the ache in my heart. I wished I could communicate directly with her and make a few comments about what I thought of her and her game. That was out of the question, so instead, I threw my will in with Lissa's once more, and together, we stepped down off the ledge and onto the room's floor.

Avery was visibly sweating, and when she realized she'd lost the psychic tug of war, her pretty face turned very ugly. "Fine," she said. "There are easier ways of killing you off."

Reed suddenly entered the room, looking as hostile as ever. I had no idea where he'd come from or how he'd known to show up right then, but he headed straight toward Lissa, hands reaching out. That open window loomed behind her, and it didn't take a genius to guess his intentions. Avery had tried to get Lissa to jump by using compulsion. Reed was just going to push her.

A mental conversation flew between Lissa and me in the space of a

heartbeat.

Okay, I told her. *Here's the situation. We're going to have to do a little role reversal.*

What are you talking about? Fear flooded her, which was understandable, seeing as Reed's hands were seconds away from grabbing her.

Well, I said, *I just did the psychic power struggle. Which means you've got to do the fighting. And I'm going to show you how.*

TWENTY-EIGHT

LISSA DIDN'T HAVE TO SAY ANYTHING to express her shock. The feelings of utter astonishment pouring into me said more than any words could have. I, however, had one important word for her:

Duck!

I think it was her surprise that made her respond so quickly. She dropped to the floor. The movement was clumsy, but it removed her body from Reed's direct attack and put her (mostly) out of range of the window. He still collided with her shoulder and the side of her head, but it only bumped her and caused a little pain.

Of course, "a little pain" meant totally different things to us. Lissa had been tortured a couple of times, but most of her battles were mental. She'd never been in a one-on-one physical confrontation. Getting thrown against walls was an average occurrence for me, but for her, a small swipe to the head was monumental.

Crawl away, I ordered. *Get away from him and the window. Head for the door if possible.*

Lissa started moving on her hands and feet, but she was too slow. Reed caught hold of her hair. I kind of felt like we were playing a game of telephone. With the delay in me giving direction and her figuring out how to respond, I might as well have been passing the message through five people before it got to her. I wished I could control her body like a puppeteer, but I was no spirit user.

It's going to hurt, but turn around as best you can and hit him.

Oh, it did hurt. Trying to turn her body meant his hold on her hair tugged that much more painfully. She managed it reasonably well, though, and flailed out at Reed. Her hits weren't that coordinated, but they surprised him enough that he let go of her hair and tried to fend her off. That's when I noticed he wasn't overly coordinated either. He was stronger than her, true, but he obviously had no combat training short of basic hits and throwing his weight around. He hadn't come here for a true fight; he'd come to just push her out the window and be done with it.

Get away if you can; get away if you can.

She scrambled across the floor, but unfortunately her escape path didn't give her access to the door. Instead, she backed further into the room until her back hit a rolling desk chair.

Grab it. Hit him with it.

Easier said than done. He was right there, still trying to grab her and jerk

her to her feet. She caught hold of the chair and tried to roll it into him. I'd wanted her to pick it up and hit him with it, but that wasn't quite so easy for her. She did, however, manage to get to her feet and get the chair between them. I directed her to keep hitting him with it in an effort to get him to retreat. It worked a little, but she didn't quite have the force to truly damage him.

Meanwhile, I half expected Avery to join in the fight. It wouldn't have taken much effort to assist Reed in subduing Lissa. Instead, out of the corner of Lissa's eye, I saw Avery sitting perfectly still, her eyes unfocused and slightly glazed over. Okay. That was weird, but I had no complaints about her being out of the conflict.

As it was, Lissa and Reed were in a stalemate, one I had to get her out of. *You're on the defensive,* I said. *You need to take the attack to him.*

I finally got a direct answer back. *What? I can't do anything like that! I have no clue how!*

I'll show you. Kick him—preferably between the legs. That'll take down most guys.

Without words, I tried to send the feelings into her, teaching her the right way to tense muscles and strike out. Steeling herself, she pushed the chair away so that there was nothing between her and Reed. It caught him by surprise, giving her a brief opening. Her leg struck out. It missed the golden spot, but it did hit his knee. That was almost as good. He stumbled back as his leg collapsed underneath him and just managed to grab the chair for support. It tried to roll, which didn't help him any.

Lissa didn't need any urging to sprint for the door at that point—except it was blocked. Simon had just entered. For a moment, both Lissa and I felt relief. A guardian! Guardians were safe. Guardians protected us. The thing was, *this* guardian worked for Avery, and it soon became clear his services went beyond merely keeping Strigoi away from her. He strode in, and with no hesitation grabbed Lissa and dragged her harshly back to the window.

My direction faltered at that moment. I'd been an okay coach at showing her how to fend off a surly teenage boy. But a guardian? And that surly teenage boy had recovered himself and joined Simon to finish the job.

Compel him!

It was my last desperate bid. That was Lissa's strength. Unfortunately, while her earlier drinking had metabolized enough to improve her coordination, it was still affecting her control of spirit. She could touch the power—but not very much of it. Her control was clumsy too. Nonetheless, her resolve was strong. She drew as much of the spirit as she could, channeling it into compulsion. Nothing happened. Then, I felt that weird tickling in my head. At first I thought Avery was back on the scene, only rather than someone reaching into me, it was like they reached *through* me.

The power in Lissa surged, and I realized what had happened. Oksana was still there, somewhere in the background, and she was lending her strength again, channeling it through me and into Lissa. Simon froze, and it was almost amusing. He twitched slightly, rocking back and forth as he tried to advance on her and finish the lethal task. It was like he was suspended in Jell-O.

Lissa was hesitant to move, for fear of breaking her control. There was also

the issue that Reed was not being compelled, but for the moment, he seemed too confused about what was happening to Simon to react.

"You can't just kill me!" Lissa blurted out. "Don't you think people are going to ask questions when they find my body shoved out a window?

"They won't notice," said Simon stiffly. Even the words required effort. "Not when you're resurrected. And if you can't be, then it was just a tragic accident that befell a troubled girl."

Slowly, slowly, he began breaking out of her compulsion. Her power, while still there, was weakening a little—there was a leak somewhere, and it was dripping out. I suspected it might be Avery's influence or simply Lissa's mental fatigue. Maybe both. A supreme look of satisfaction crossed Simon's features as he lunged forward, and then—

He froze again.

A blazing gold aura lit up in Lissa's periphery. She glanced over just enough to see Adrian in the doorway. The look on his face was comical, but shocked or not, he'd picked up enough to target Simon. It was Adrian's compulsion holding the guardian in place now. Lissa squirmed away, yet again trying to keep out of that damned window's opening.

"Hold him!" Lissa cried.

Adrian grimaced. "I . . . can't. What the hell? It's like there's someone else there. . . ."

"Avery," said Lissa, sparing a brief glance at the other girl. Avery's face had gone pale even for a Moroi. Her breathing was heavy, and her sweating had increased. She was fighting Adrian's compulsion. A few seconds later, Simon broke free yet again. He advanced on Lissa and Adrian, though his movements seemed sluggish.

Son of a bitch, I thought.

Now what? demanded Lissa.

Reed. Go for Reed. Get him out of the picture.

Reed had been frozen during the struggle with Simon, watching with fascination. And like those of the guardian, Reed's actions seemed a little sluggish. Still, he was moving toward Lissa again. Simon had apparently decided Adrian was the immediate threat and was heading that way. Time to see if dividing and conquering would work.

What about Adrian? Lissa asked.

We're going to have to leave him on his own for a minute. Get to Reed. Knock him out.

What???

But she advanced on him anyway, moving with a determination that warmed me with pride. His face curled into a snarl. He was frantic and overconfident, though—not thinking clearly and still moving in an ungainly way. Once more, I attempted to teach Lissa without words. I couldn't make her do anything, but I tried to make her feel what it was like to punch someone. How to draw back her arm, curl her fingers in the proper way, build up the strength. After what I'd seen her do earlier, the best I could hope for was a decent approximation of a punch, enough to keep him off her and create further delay.

And that's when something truly beautiful happened.

Lissa socked him in the nose. And I mean, *socked.* We both heard the impact, heard the nose break. Blood came out. He flew backward, both he and Lissa staring wide-eyed. Never, never would I have thought Lissa capable of something like that. Not sweet, delicate, beautiful Lissa.

I wanted to whoop and dance with joy. But this wasn't over yet.

Don't stop! Hit him again. You've got to knock him out!

I did! she cried, horrified at what she'd done. Her fist was also in agonizing pain. I hadn't really mentioned that part during my coaching.

No, you've got to incapacitate him, I told her. *I think he and Avery are bonded, and I think she's taking her strength from him.* It made sense now, why he'd frozen when Avery drew power to use compulsion, why he'd known to show up when he had. She'd used their bond to summon him.

And so Lissa went after Reed again. She got in two more punches, one of which knocked his head against the wall. His lips parted and his features went slack. He dropped to the floor, eyes staring vacantly. I wasn't sure if he was entirely unconscious, but he was out of this for the moment. Off to the side, I heard a small cry from Avery.

Lissa turned to Adrian and Simon. Adrian had ceased any attempts at compulsion, because Simon was engaged in a full-on attack. Adrian's face showed he'd taken a few hits of his own, and I figured that, like Lissa, he'd never engaged in this kind of physical combat. Without any need for direction from me, Lissa strode over and turned on her compulsion. Simon jerked in surprise, not stopping his attack, but caught off guard. Lissa was still weak, but the walls around him had dropped a little, just as I'd suspected they would.

"Help me!" cried Lissa.

With the momentary lapse on Simon's part, Adrian tried to wield his spirit too. Lissa felt and saw the change in his aura as the magic flowed through him. She felt him join her in their psychic attack on Simon, and a moment later, I sensed Oksana joining the fray. I wanted to play general and shout orders, but this wasn't my battle anymore.

Simon's eyes went wide, and he fell to his knees. Lissa could sense the other two spirit users—and was a bit surprised by Oksana's presence—and had the vague impression that they were all doing slightly different things to Simon. Lissa was trying to compel him to stop his attack, to simply sit still. Her brief brush with Adrian's magic told her he was trying to make the guardian sleep, and Oksana was attempting to get Simon to run out of the room.

The conflicting messages and all that power were too much. The last of Simon's defenses fell as all those mixed messages blasted into him, creating a tidal wave of spirit. He collapsed to the floor. With all of their magic combined, the spirit users had knocked him unconscious. Lissa and Adrian turned to Avery, bracing themselves, but there was no need.

As soon as all that spirit had blasted into Simon, Avery had begun screaming. And screaming and screaming. She gripped the sides of her head, the sound of her voice horrible and grating. Lissa and Adrian exchanged glances, unsure how to handle this new development.

"For God's sake," gasped Adrian, exhausted. "How do we shut her up?"

Lissa didn't know. She considered approaching Avery and trying to help her,

in spite of all that had happened. But a few seconds later, Avery grew quiet. She didn't pass out like her companions had. She just sat there, staring. Her expression no longer resembled the dazed look she'd had while wielding spirit. It was just . . . blank. Like there was nothing in her at all.

"Wh-what happened?" asked Lissa.

I had the answer. *The spirit flooded from Simon into her. It fried her.*

Lissa was startled. *How could it go from Simon to her?*

Because they're bonded.

You said she was bonded to Reed!

She is. She's bonded to both of them.

Lissa had been too distracted while fighting for her life, but I'd been able to notice everyone's auras through her eyes. Avery—no longer masking hers—had possessed a gold one, just like Adrian and Lissa. Simon and Reed had had nearly identical ones, with ordinary colors—ringed in black. They were shadow-kissed, both having been brought back from the dead by Avery.

Lissa asked no more questions and simply collapsed into Adrian's arms. There was nothing romantic about it, just a desperate need on both their parts to be close to a friend.

"Why did you come?" she asked him.

"Are you kidding? How could I not? You guys were like a bonfire with all the spirit you were wielding. I felt it all the way across campus." He glanced around. "Man, I have a lot of questions."

"You and me both," she muttered.

I have to go, I told Lissa. I felt a little wistful at having to leave them.

I miss you. When will you be back?

Soon.

Thank you. Thank you for being there for me.

Always. I suspected I was smiling back in my own body. *Oh, and Lissa? Tell Adrian I'm proud of him.*

The Academy room faded. I was once more sitting on a bed halfway around the world. Abe was looking at me with concern. Mark also was concerned, but he had eyes only for Oksana, who lay down beside me. She looked a little like Avery, pale and sweating. Mark clasped her hand frantically, fear all over him. "Are you okay?"

She smiled. "Just tired. I'll be all right."

I wanted to hug her. "Thank you," I breathed. "Thank you so much."

"I'm glad to have helped," she said. "But I hope I don't have to do it again. It was . . . strange. I'm not sure what role I played there."

"Me either." It had been weird. Sometimes it was like Oksana had actually been there, fighting right along with Lissa and the rest. Other times, I'd felt as though Oksana had merged with me. I shuddered. Too many minds linked together.

"Next time, you have to be by her side," Oksana said. "In the real world."

I looked down at my hands, confused and unsure what to think. The silver ring gleamed up at me. I took it off and handed it to her.

"This ring saved me. Can it heal you even though you made it?"

She held it in her hand for a moment and then gave it back. "No, but like I said, I'll recover. I heal quickly on my own."

It was true. I'd seen Lissa heal remarkably fast in the past. It was part of always having spirit in you. I stared at the ring, and something troubling came to mind. It was a thought that had struck me while riding with the old couple to Novosibirsk, when I'd moved in and out of consciousness.

"Oksana . . . a Strigoi touched this ring. And for a few moments—while he did—it was like . . . well, he was still Strigoi, no question. But while he held it, he was almost like his old self too."

Oksana didn't answer right away. She looked up at Mark, and they held each other's gazes for a long time. He bit his lip and shook his head.

"Don't," he said. "It's a fairy tale."

"What?" I exclaimed. I looked back and forth between him. "If you know something about this—about Strigoi—you have to tell me!"

Mark spoke sharply in Russian, a warning in his voice. Oksana looked equally determined. "It's not our place to withhold information," she replied. She turned to me, face grave. "Mark told you about the Moroi we met long ago . . . the other spirit user?"

I nodded. "Yeah."

"He used to tell a lot of stories—most of which I don't think were true. But one of them . . . well, he claimed he restored a Strigoi to life."

Abe, silent thus far, scoffed. "That *is* a fairy tale."

"What?" My whole world reeled. "How?"

"I don't know. He never elaborated much, and the details often changed. His mind was going, and I think half of what he said was imaginary," she explained.

"He's crazy," said Mark. "It wasn't true. Don't get caught up in an insane man's fantasy. Don't fixate on this. Don't let it become your next vigilante quest. You need to go back to your bondmate."

I swallowed, every emotion in the world churning in my stomach. Was it true? Had a spirit user restored a Strigoi to life? Theoretically . . . well, if spirit users could heal and bring back the dead, why not the undead? And Dimitri . . . Dimitri had definitely seemed altered while holding the ring. Had spirit affected him and touched some piece of his old self? At the time, I'd just assumed it was fond memories of his family affecting him. . . .

"I need to talk to this guy," I murmured.

Not that I knew why. Fairy tale or not, it was too late. I'd done it. I'd killed Dimitri. Nothing would bring him back now, no miracle of spirit. My heart rate increased, and I could hardly breathe. In my mind's eye, I saw him falling, falling . . . falling forever with the stake in his chest. Would he have said he loved me? I would ask myself that for the rest of my life.

Agony and grief flooded me, though at the same time, relief was there too. I had freed Dimitri from a state of evil. I had brought him peace, sending him on to happiness. Maybe he and Mason were together in heaven somewhere, practicing some guardian moves. I had done the right thing. There should be no regret here.

Oblivious to my emotions, Oksana addressed my last statement. "Mark wasn't kidding. This man is crazy—if he's even still alive. The last time we saw him, he could barely hold up a conversation or even use his magic. He ran off into hiding. No one knows where he is—except maybe his brother."

"Enough," warned Mark.

Abe's attention was piqued, however. He leaned forward, shrewd as ever. "What's this man's name?"

"Robert Doru," said Mark after a few hesitant moments.

It was no one I knew, and I realized how pointless this all was. This guy was a lost cause and had likely imagined the whole idea of saving a Strigoi in a fit of insanity. Dimitri was gone. This part of my life was over. I needed to get back to Lissa.

Then I noticed that Abe had gone very still.

"Do you know him?" I asked.

"No. Do *you*?"

"No." I scrutinized Abe's face. "You sure look like you know something, Zmey."

"I know *of* him," Abe clarified. "He's an illegitimate royal. His father had an affair, and Robert was the result. His father actually included him as part of the family. Robert and his half-brother grew quite close, though few knew about it." Of course Abe would know about it, though. "Doru is Robert's mother's last name."

No surprise. Doru wasn't a royal name. "What's his father's last name?"

"Dashkov. Trenton Dashkov."

"That," I told him, "is a name I know."

I had met Trenton Dashkov years ago while accompanying Lissa and her family to a royal holiday party. Trenton had been an old, stooped man then, kind but on the brink of death. Moroi often lived to be over a hundred, but he'd been pushing a hundred and twenty—which was ancient even by their standards. There had been no sign or whisper of him having an illegitimate son, but Trenton's legitimate son had been there. That son had even danced with me, showing a great courtesy to a lowly dhampir girl.

"Trenton is Victor Dashkov's father," I said. "You're saying Robert Doru is Victor Dashkov's half-brother."

Abe nodded, still watching me closely. Abe, as I'd noted, knew everything. He likely knew my history with Victor.

Oksana frowned. "Victor Dashkov is someone important, isn't he?" Out in their Siberian cottage, she was removed from the turmoil of Moroi politics, unaware that the man who would have been king had been locked away in prison.

I started laughing—but not because I found any humor in the situation. This whole thing was unbelievable, and my hysteria was the only way to let out all the crazy feelings within me. Exasperation. Resignation. Irony.

"What's so funny?" asked Mark, startled.

"Nothing," I said, knowing if I didn't stop laughing, I'd probably start crying. "That's the thing. It's not funny at all."

What a wonderful twist to my life. The only person alive who might know something about saving Strigoi was the half-brother of my greatest living enemy, Victor Dashkov. And the only person who might know where Robert was was Victor himself. Victor had known a lot about spirit, and now I had a good idea where he'd first learned about it.

Not that it mattered. None of this mattered anymore. Victor himself could

have been able to convert Strigoi for all the good it would have done me. Dimitri was dead by my hand. He was gone, saved in the only way I knew how. I'd had to choose between him and Lissa once before, and I'd chosen him. Now there could be no question. I'd chosen her. She was real. She was alive. Dimitri was the past.

I'd been staring absentmindedly at the wall, and now I looked up and met Abe squarely in the eyes. "All right, old man," I said. "Pack me up and send me home."

TWENTY-NINE

THE FLIGHT WAS MORE LIKE THIRTY HOURS.

Getting from the middle of Siberia to the middle of Montana wasn't easy. I flew from Novosibirsk to Moscow to Amsterdam to Seattle to Missoula. Four different flights. Five different airports. A lot of running around. It was exhausting, yet when I handed over my passport to get back into the U.S. in Seattle, I felt a strange surge of emotion in me . . . joy and relief.

Before leaving Russia, I had thought Abe might come back with me and finish his task himself, hand-delivering me to whomever had hired him.

"You really are going back now, aren't you?" he asked at the airport. "To the school? You aren't going to get off at one of your stops and disappear?"

I smiled. "No. I'm going back to St. Vladimir's."

"And you'll stay there?" he pressed. He didn't *quite* look as dangerous as he had in Baia, but I could see a glint of hardness in his eyes.

My smile slipped. "I don't know what's going to happen. I don't have a place there anymore."

"Rose—"

I held up a hand to stop him, surprised at my own determination. "Enough. No after-school specials. You said you were hired to get me back there. It isn't your job to say what I do after that." At least, I hoped not. Whoever wanted me back had to be someone at the Academy. I'd be there soon. They had won. Abe's services were no longer required.

Despite his victory, he didn't look happy about relinquishing me. Glancing up at one of the departure boards, he sighed. "You need to go through security, or you'll miss your flight."

I nodded. "Thanks for . . ." What exactly? His help? " . . . For everything."

I started to turn away, but he touched my shoulder. "Is that all you're wearing?"

Most of my clothing had been scattered around Russia. One of the other Alchemists had located shoes, jeans, and a sweater, but otherwise, I was winging it until I got back to the U.S. "I don't really need anything else," I told him.

Abe arched an eyebrow. Turning to one of his guardians, he made a small gesture toward me. Immediately, the guardian took off his coat and handed it over. The guy was lanky, but the coat was still too big for me.

"No, I don't need—"

"Take it," ordered Abe.

I took it, and then to my further shock, Abe began unwinding the scarf from

around his neck. It was one of his nicer ones, too: cashmere, woven with an array of brilliant colors, more suited to the Caribbean than here or Montana. I started to protest this as well, but the look on his face silenced me. I put the scarf around my neck and thanked him, wondering if I'd ever see him again. I didn't bother asking because I had a feeling he wouldn't tell me anyway.

When I finally landed in Missoula thirty hours later, I was pretty sure I didn't want to fly in a plane anytime soon—as in, like, the next five years. Maybe ten. Without any luggage, getting out of the airport was easy. Abe had sent word ahead of my arrival, but I had no idea who they'd send to get me. Alberta, who ran the guardians at St. Vladimir's, seemed a likely choice. Or maybe it would be my mother. I never knew where she was at any given moment, and suddenly, I really, really wanted to see her. She would be a logical choice too.

So it was with some surprise that I saw that the person waiting for me at the airport's exit was Adrian.

A grin spread over my face, and I picked up the pace. I threw my arms around him, astonishing both of us. "I have never been happier to see you in my life," I said.

He squeezed me tightly and then let me go, regarding me admiringly. "The dreams never do justice to real life, little dhampir. You look amazing." I'd cleaned up after the ordeal with the Strigoi, and Oksana had continued healing me in spite of my protests—even the bruises on my neck, which she had never asked about. I didn't want anyone else to know about those.

"And you look . . ." I studied him. He was dressed as nicely as always, with a three-quarter-length wool coat and green scarf that matched his eyes. His dark brown hair had that crafted messiness he liked, but his face—ah, well. As I'd noted before, Simon had gotten a few good punches on him. One of Adrian's eyes was swollen and ringed with bruises. Nonetheless, thinking about him and everything he'd done . . . well, none of the flaws mattered. " . . . Gorgeous."

"Liar," he said.

"Couldn't Lissa have healed that black eye away?"

"It's a badge of honor. Makes me seem manly. Come on, your carriage awaits."

"Why'd they send you?" I asked as we walked toward the parking lot. "You *are* sober, aren't you?"

Adrian didn't dignify that with an answer. "Well, the school has no official responsibility to you, seeing as you're a dropout and everything. So they weren't really obligated to come get you. None of your other friends can leave campus . . . but me? I'm just a free spirit, hanging out. So I borrowed a car, and here I am."

His words sparked mixed reactions in me. I was touched that he'd taken the trouble to come out here but was bothered by the part about the school having no responsibility to me. Throughout all my travels, I'd gone back and forth in thinking of St. Vladimir's as home . . . yet, in the most technical terms, it truly wasn't anymore. I would just be a visitor.

As we settled into the drive, Adrian caught me up on the aftermath at the school. After the big psychic showdown, I hadn't delved much into Lissa's

mind. Oksana had healed my body, but mentally, I was still exhausted and grieving. Even though I'd accomplished what I set out to do, that image of Dimitri falling and falling still haunted me.

"It turns out you were right about Avery bonding Simon and Reed," Adrian said. "From what information we could gather, it sounds like Simon was killed in a fight that Avery witnessed years ago. Everyone thought it was a miracle he survived, not actually realizing the truth."

"She kept her powers hidden like the rest of you," I mused. "And then Reed died later?"

"Well, that's the weird thing," said Adrian, frowning. "No one can really tell when he died. I mean, he's royal. He's been pampered his whole life, right? But based on what we could get out of him—which wasn't much, since they're all pretty messed up now—it sounds like Avery may have intentionally killed him and then brought him back."

"Just like with Lissa," I said, recalling Simon's words during the fight. "Avery wanted to kill her, bring her back, and bond her. But why Lissa of all people?"

"My guess? Because she's a spirit user. Now that spirit's not a secret anymore, it was only a matter of time before Avery heard about Lissa and me. I think Avery thought bonding Lissa would increase her own power. As it was, she was sucking up a lot of energy from those other two." Adrian shook his head. "I wasn't kidding about sensing that spirit all the way across campus. The amounts Avery had to wield to compel so many people, mask her aura, and who knows what else . . . well, it was staggering."

I stared off at the freeway ahead of us, considering the consequences of Avery's actions. "And that's why Reed was so messed up—why he was so angry and ready for a fight. He and Simon were absorbing all that darkness she was producing by using spirit. Just like I do with Lissa."

"Yeah, except you were nothing like these guys. It wasn't so obvious with Simon—he was better at keeping a straight face—but both of them were totally on the edge. And now? They're over the edge. All three of them are."

I recalled Simon staring at nothing and Avery screaming. I shivered. "When you say over the edge . . . ?"

"I mean totally and completely insane. Those three are going to be institutionalized for the rest of their lives."

"From what you . . . we all did?" I asked, aghast.

"Partly," he agreed. "Avery was throwing all that power at us, and when we threw it back and then some . . . well, I think it was like an overload to their minds. And to be honest, considering how Reed and Simon already were, the stage was probably set for this. With Avery too."

"Mark was right," I murmured.

"Who?"

"The other shadow-kissed guy I met. He was talking about how Lissa and I might be able to heal the darkness away from each other someday. It takes a careful balance of power between the spirit user and the shadow-kissed. I still don't fully get it, but I'm guessing Avery's little circle of three wouldn't have been able to handle that kind of balancing act. I don't think bonding to more than one person is healthy."

“Huh.” Adrian didn’t say anything for a while and simply pondered all this. Finally, he laughed. “Man, I can’t believe you found another spirit user and shadow-kissed person. It’s like finding a needle in a haystack, but that kind of thing always happens to you. I can’t wait to hear the rest of what you’ve been doing.”

I looked away and rested my cheek against the glass. “It’s actually not very interesting.”

None of the Academy officials knew about my role in the showdown with Avery. So it wasn’t like anyone questioned me when we got back. They were still doing cleanup and asking Adrian and Lissa a lot of questions. Spirit was still such a new phenomenon that no one knew what to think of what had happened. Avery and her bondmates had been taken away for help, and her father had already gone on a temporary leave of absence.

Adrian signed me in as his guest, which got me a campus pass. Like all visitors, I was also given a list of where I’d stay and what I could and couldn’t do. I promptly ignored it.

“I have to go,” I told Adrian immediately.

He gave me a knowing smile. “I figured.”

“Thank you . . . for coming to get me. I’m sorry I’ve got to leave you—”

He waved off my worries. “You aren’t leaving me. You’re back; that’s what counts. I’ve been patient this long—I can hold out a little longer.”

I held his eyes for a moment, startled at the warm feelings that suddenly bubbled up within me. I kept them to myself, though, only giving Adrian a quick smile before I set off across campus.

I got a lot of strange looks when I went to Lissa’s dorm. It was right after classes had ended, so student traffic was pretty busy with people rushing in or out to get somewhere. Yet, when I passed by, silence fell and people stopped moving and talking. It reminded me of when Lissa and I had been returned to school after running away. We’d been marched through the cafeteria and had received similar treatment from our peers.

Maybe it was just my imagination, but it seemed worse this time. The looks more shocked. The silence heavier. Last time, I think people had believed we’d run off as some sort of prank. This time, no one really knew why I’d left. I’d come out of the school’s attack a hero, only to drop out and disappear. I think some of Lissa’s dorm mates thought they were seeing a ghost.

Ignoring the gossip and opinions of others was something I had a lot of practice with, and I sprinted past the onlookers without a backward glance, taking the stairs two at a time. I shut myself off to Lissa’s feelings as I walked down her hall. It seemed silly, but I wanted to be surprised. I just wanted to open my eyes and see her in person, with no warnings as to how she was feeling or what she was thinking. I knocked on the door.

Adrian had said seeing me in dreams couldn’t compare to seeing me in person. The same was true with Lissa. Being in her head was nothing like being near her in reality. The door opened, and it was like an apparition materializing before me, some sort of heavenly messenger descended from above. I’d never been away from her for this long, and after all this time, part of me wondered if I was imagining this.

Her hand went to her mouth, and she stared at me wide-eyed. I think she felt the same way—and she hadn't even had warning of my visit. She'd just been told I was coming "soon." No doubt I seemed like a phantom to her, too.

And with that reunion . . . it was like I was emerging from a cave—one I'd been in for almost five weeks—into the bright light of day. When Dimitri had turned, I'd felt like I'd lost part of my soul. When I'd left Lissa, another piece had gone. Now, seeing her . . . I began to think maybe my soul might be able to heal. Maybe I could go on after all. I didn't feel 100 percent whole yet, but her presence filled up that missing part of me. I felt more like myself than I had in ages.

A world of questions and confusion hung in the silence between us. In spite of everything we'd been through with Avery, there was still a lot of unresolved business from when I had first left the school. For the first time since I'd set foot on the Academy's grounds, I felt afraid. Afraid that Lissa would reject me or scream at me for what I'd done.

Instead, she drew me into a giant hug. "I knew it," she said. She was already choking on her sobs. "I knew you'd come back."

"Of course," I murmured into her shoulder. "I said I would."

My best friend. I had my best friend back. If I had her, I could recover from what had happened in Siberia. I could go on with my life.

"I'm sorry," she said. "So sorry for what I did."

I pulled away in surprise. Stepping into the room, I shut the door behind us. "Sorry? What do you have to be sorry for?" Despite my joy at seeing her, I'd come here expecting her to still be angry at me for leaving. None of that mess with Avery would have happened if I'd stayed around. I blamed myself.

She sat down on her bed, eyes wet. "For what I said . . . when you left. I had no right to say the things I did. I have no right to control you. And I feel horrible because . . ." She ran a hand over her eyes, trying to dry the worst of the tears. "I feel horrible because I told you I wouldn't bring back Dimitri. I mean, I know it didn't matter, but I should have still offered to—"

"No, no!" I sank down in front of her and grabbed her hands, still awed to be with her again. "Look at me. You have nothing to be sorry for. I said things I shouldn't have, too. It happens when people are upset. Neither of us should beat ourselves up over it. And as for bringing him back . . ." I sighed. "You did the right thing in refusing. Even if we had found him before he'd been turned, it wouldn't have mattered. You can't safely bond more than one person. That's what went wrong with Avery."

Well, that was part of what had gone wrong with Avery. Manipulation and abuse of power had played a huge role too.

Lissa's sobs quieted. "How did you do that, Rose? How were you there at the end when I needed you? How did you know?"

"I was with another spirit user. I met her in Siberia. She can actively reach into people's minds—anyone's, not just those she's bonded to—and communicate. Like Avery could, actually. Oksana reached into me while I connected to you. It's really strange how it all went down." To say the least.

"Another power I don't have," said Lissa ruefully.

I grinned. "Hey, I have yet to meet any spirit user who can throw a punch like you can. That was poetry in motion, Liss."

She groaned, but I sensed her pleasure at my use of the old nickname. “I hope I don’t ever have to do that again. I’m not meant to be a fighter, Rose. You’re the one who charges out there. I’m the one who waits with moral support and post-battle healing.” She held up her hands and looked at them. “Ugh. No. I definitely don’t want to do any more hitting or punching.”

“But at least now you know you can. If you ever want to practice . . .”

“No!” She laughed. “I’ve got too many things to practice with Adrian now—especially after you keep telling me about more and more things that everyone else can do with spirit.”

“Fine. Maybe it’s best if things go back to how they were.”

Her face sobered. “God, I hope so. Rose . . . I did so many stupid things while Avery was around.” Through the bond, I felt her greatest regret: Christian. Her heart ached for him, and she’d shed a lot of tears. After having Dimitri ripped away from me, I knew how it felt to lose that kind of love, and I swore to myself that I’d do something to help her. But now wasn’t the time. She and I need to reconnect first.

“You couldn’t help it, though,” I pointed out. “She was too strong with her compulsion—especially when she got you to drink and killed your defenses.”

“Yeah, but not everyone knows that or will understand it.”

“They’ll forget,” I said. “They always do.”

I understood her angst over her reputation, but I doubted there would be any truly permanent damage—aside from Christian. Adrian and I had analyzed Avery’s manipulation and figured things out once we’d paired it with Simon’s comment about Lissa having an unfortunate accident. Avery had wanted to make Lissa look unstable in the event Avery somehow didn’t have the strength to resurrect her. If Lissa actually died, no one would investigate much. After weeks of crazy, drunken behavior, her losing control and accidentally falling out of a window would be tragic but not completely out of the realm of possibility.

“Spirit’s a pain in the ass,” Lissa declared. “Everyone wants to take advantage of you—non-users like Victor and users like Avery. I swear, I’d go back on my medication if I wasn’t paranoid now about protecting myself from other Avery-type people. Why’d she want to kill me and not Adrian? Why am I always the target?”

I couldn’t help a smile in spite of the grim topic. “Because she wanted you for a minion and him for a boyfriend. She probably wanted a guy who could help escalate her rise in society and couldn’t risk killing him in a bonding attempt. Or who knows? Maybe she would have eventually tried him, too. I honestly wouldn’t be surprised if she felt threatened by you and wanted to make sure she had the only other known female spirit user under her control. Face it, Liss. We could spend hours trying to figure out how Avery Lazar thinks and get nowhere.”

“True, true.” She slid off the bed and sat next to me on the floor. “But you know what? I feel like we could talk about anything for hours. You’ve been here ten minutes, and it’s like . . . well, it’s like you never left.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. Before he was a Strigoi, being with Dimitri had always felt natural and right. Being with Lissa also felt natural and right—though it was a different kind of rightness. In my grief over Dimitri, I’d nearly forgotten what I

had with her. They were two sides of me.

In that uncanny way she had of guessing thoughts, Lissa said, “I meant what I said earlier. I’m sorry for what I said—about acting like I have some right to dictate your life. I don’t. If you decide to stay or guard me, you do that by your choice and your kindness. I want to make sure you live and choose your own life.”

“There’s nothing ‘kind’ about it. I’ve always wanted to protect you. I still do.” I sighed. “I just . . . I just had things to take care of. I had to get myself together—and I’m sorry I didn’t handle it with you very well.” There was a lot of apologizing going on, but I realized that was how it was with people you cared about. You forgave each other and moved on.

Lissa hesitated before asking her next question, but I’d known it was coming. “So . . . what happened? Did you . . . did you find him . . . ?”

At first, I didn’t think I wanted to talk about it, but then I realized that I *needed* to. And the thing was, a few different things had gone wrong with Lissa and me before. One had been that she’d taken me for granted. The other had been that I wouldn’t tell her the truth—and then I’d resent her for it later. If we were going to patch up this friendship and forgive each other, we had to make sure we didn’t repeat the past.

“I did find him,” I said at last.

And I launched into the story, telling her everything that had happened to me: my travels, the Belikovs, the Alchemists, Oksana and Mark, the unpromised, and of course, Dimitri. Just as Lissa had joked earlier, we talked for hours. I poured out my heart to her, and she listened without judgment. Her face was compassionate the whole time, and when I reached the end, I was sobbing, all the love and rage and anguish I’d been holding onto since that night on the bridge exploding out of me. I hadn’t told anyone else in Novosibirsk exactly where I’d been during my time with Dimitri. I hadn’t dared tell anyone I’d been a blood whore for a Strigoi. I had stayed vague, hoping if I didn’t talk about it, then maybe it wouldn’t be real.

Now, with Lissa, I had to accept the reality of everything and truly *feel* it: I had killed the man I loved.

A knock at the door jolted us out of a world that contained only her and me. I glanced at the clock and was startled to see it was almost curfew time. I wondered if I was being thrown out. But when Lissa opened the door—after I’d hastily dried my eyes—the waiting dorm worker had a message of a different sort.

“Alberta wants to see you,” the woman told me. “She thought you might be here.”

Lissa and I exchanged glances. “When? Now?” I asked.

The woman shrugged. “From the way she sounded? Yeah, I’d say now. Or sooner.” She shut the door. Alberta was the captain of the guardians on campus, and when she spoke, people acted.

“I wonder what this is about?” asked Lissa.

I stood up, hating to leave. “Any number of things, I imagine. I’ll go see her and then head back to guest housing. Not that I’ll sleep. I have no clue what time zone I’m in anymore.”

Lissa gave me a parting hug, one we both had a hard time letting go of.

“Good luck.”

I started to turn the door’s handle and then thought of something. I slipped the silver ring off of my finger and handed it to Lissa.

“Is this the ring you—oh!” She wrapped her hand around it, her face growing enraptured.

“Can you feel the magic in it?” I asked.

“Yeah . . . it’s weak, but it’s in there.” She held the ring up to the light and stared at it. She probably wasn’t going to notice when I left because I had a feeling she’d be studying the ring all night. “It’s so strange. I can almost immediately feel how she did this.”

“Mark said we probably had a while to go before we could do the healing they do . . . but maybe you could figure out how to make charms while we wait?”

Her jade green eyes were still on the ring. “Yeah . . . I think I might.”

I smiled at her excitement and tried to leave again, but she caught my arm. “Hey . . . Rose . . . I know I’ll see you tomorrow, but . . .”

“But what?”

“I just wanted to say, after everything that’s happened . . . well, I don’t want us to ever have this kind of separation again. I mean, I know we can’t be together every single second—and that’s kind of creepy anyway—but we’re bonded for a reason. We’re meant to look out for each other and be there for each other.”

Her words sent a shiver through me, like we were wrapped in powers greater than ourselves. “We will be.”

“No, I mean . . . you’re always there for me. Every time, I’m in danger, and you come rushing in to save me. Not anymore.”

“You don’t want me to save you anymore?”

“That’s not what I meant! I want to be there for you too, Rose. If I can throw a punch, I can do anything. Even though that *really* hurt.” She exhaled in frustration. “God, I’m not making any sense. Look, the point is, if you ever have to go off alone, take me with you. Don’t leave me behind.”

“Liss—”

“I’m serious.” Her luminous beauty burned with determination and purpose. “Whatever obstacles you have to go against, I’m going to be there for you. Don’t go alone. Swear to me that if you ever decide to take off again, you’ll bring me. We’ll do it together.”

I started to protest as a million fears came to my mind. How could I risk her life? Yet looking at her, I knew she was right. For better or worse, we had a bond we couldn’t escape. Lissa was indeed tied to that piece of my soul, and we were stronger fighting together than apart.

“Okay,” I said, clasping her hand. “I swear it. The next time I go do something stupid that might get me killed, you can come along.”

THIRTY

ALBERTA WAS WAITING FOR ME in the front office of the guardians' administrative building. Alberta's role as captain here was remarkable, considering the lower numbers of women in our ranks. She was in her fifties and one of the toughest women I'd met. Her sandy hair was showing some gray, and years of working outdoors had weathered her skin.

"Welcome back, Rose," she said, standing up at my approach. She certainly didn't hug me, and her manner was businesslike, but the fact that she used my first name was a generous gesture for her. That, and I thought I saw a small spark of relief and happiness in her eyes. "Let's go to my office."

I'd never been there. Any disciplinary issues I had with the guardians were usually addressed in committee. Unsurprisingly, the office was spotless, everything arranged with military efficiency. We sat on opposite sides of her desk, and I braced myself for an interrogation.

"Rose," she said, leaning toward me. "I'm going to be blunt with you. I'm not going to give you lectures or demand any explanations. Honestly, since you aren't my student anymore, I don't have the right to ask or tell you anything."

It was like what Adrian had said. "You can lecture," I told her. "I've always respected you and want to hear what you have to say."

The ghost of a smile flashed on her face. "All right, here it is. You screwed up."

"Wow. You weren't kidding about bluntness."

"The reasons don't matter. You shouldn't have left. You shouldn't have dropped out. Your education and training are too valuable—no matter how much you think you know—and *you* are too talented to risk throwing away your future."

I almost laughed. "To tell you the truth? I'm not sure what my future is anymore."

"Which is why you need to graduate."

"But I dropped out."

She snorted. "Then drop back in!"

"I—what? How?"

"With paperwork. Just like everything else in the world."

To be honest, I hadn't known what I'd do once I got back here. My immediate concern was Lissa—to be with her and make sure she was okay. I knew I couldn't officially be her guardian anymore, but I'd figured once we were together, no one could stop her from hanging out with a friend. I'd be

her hired bodyguard, so to speak, kind of like what Abe had. And in the meantime, I'd bum around campus like Adrian.

But to enroll again?

"I . . . I missed a month. Maybe more." My days were scattered. It was the first week of May, and I'd left near the end of March, on my birthday. What was that? Five weeks? Almost six?

"You missed two years and managed to catch up. I have faith in you. And even if you have trouble, graduating with low grades is better than not graduating at all."

I tried to imagine myself back in this world. Had it really only been a little over a month? Classes . . . day-to-day intrigue . . . how could I just go back to that? How could I return to that life after seeing the way Dimitri's family lived, after being with Dimitri and losing him—again.

Would he have said he loved me?

"I don't know what to say," I told Alberta. "This is kind of a lot to take in."

"Well, you should decide quickly. The sooner you're back in class, the better."

"They'll really let me?" That was the part I found a little unbelievable.

"*I'll* let you," she said. "No way am I letting someone like you get away. And now that Lazar is gone . . . well, things are crazy around here. No one's going to give me much trouble in filing the paperwork." Her wry smile slipped a little. "And if they do give us any trouble . . . I've been made to understand that you have a benefactor who can pull a few favors to smooth everything over."

"A benefactor," I repeated flatly. "A benefactor who wears flashy scarves and gold jewelry?"

She shrugged. "No one I know. Don't even know his name—only that he'll threaten to withhold a considerable donation to the school if you aren't let back in. *If* you want in."

Yeah. Deals and blackmail. I was pretty sure I knew who my benefactor was. "Give me some time to think about it. I'll decide soon—I promise."

She frowned, thoughtful, and then gave a sharp nod. "All right."

We both stood up, and she walked me toward the building's entrance. I glanced over at her. "Hey, if I do graduate . . . do you think there's ever any way I could be in line to be Lissa's guardian officially again? I know they've already picked out people for her and that I'm in, ah, a bit of disgrace."

We stopped by the outer doors, and Alberta rested a hand on her hip. "I don't know. We can certainly try. The situation's gotten a lot more complicated."

"Yeah, I know," I said sadly, recalling Tatiana's high-handed actions.

"But, like I said, we'll do what we can. What I said about graduating with low grades? You won't. Well, maybe in math and science—but that's out of my control. You'll be the best among the novices, though. I'll work with you myself."

"Okay," I said, realizing what a concession that was on her part. "Thank you."

I had just stepped outside when she called my name. "Rose?"

I caught the door and glanced back. "Yeah?"

Alberta's face was gentle . . . something I'd never seen before. "I'm sorry," she said. "Sorry for everything that happened. And that none of us could do anything about it."

I saw in her eyes then that she knew about Dimitri and me. I wasn't sure how. Maybe she'd heard it after the battle; maybe she'd guessed beforehand. Regardless, there was no chastisement in her face, only sincere sorrow and empathy. I gave her a brief nod of acknowledgment and went outside.

I found Christian the next day, but our conversation was brief. He was on his way to meet with some of his trainees and was running late. But he hugged me and seemed genuinely happy to have me back. It showed how far we'd come, considering the antagonistic relationship we'd had when we first met.

"About time," he said. "Lissa and Adrian get the market share on worrying about you, but they're not the only ones. And someone needs to put Adrian in his place, you know. I can't do it *all* the time."

"Thanks. It kills me to say this, but I missed you too. No one's sarcasm compares to yours in Russia." My amusement faded. "But since you mentioned Lissa—"

"No, no." He held up his hand by way of protest, face hardening. "I *knew* you were going to go there."

"Christian! She loves you. You know that what happened wasn't her fault—"

"I know that," he interrupted. "But it doesn't mean it didn't hurt. Rose, I know it's in your nature to rush in and say what everyone else is afraid to, but please . . . not this time. I need time to figure things out."

I had to bite back a lot of comments. Lissa had mentioned Christian in our talk yesterday. What had happened between them was one of her biggest regrets—probably the thing she hated Avery the most for. Lissa wanted to approach him and make up, but he'd kept his distance. And yes, he was right. It wasn't my place to rush in—yet. But I did need them to fix this.

So I respected his wishes and simply nodded. "Okay. For now."

My last words made his smile twist a little. "Thanks. Look, I've got to head off. If you ever want to show these kids how to kick ass the old-fashioned way, come by sometime. Jill would pass out if she saw you again."

I told him I would and let him go on his way, seeing as I had places to be. No way was I finished with him, though.

I had a dinner date with Adrian and Lissa, up in one of the lounges in guest housing. Talking to Christian had made me late, and I hurried through the building's lobby, barely taking note of my surroundings.

"Always in a rush," a voice said. "It's a wonder anyone can get you to stop moving."

I came to a halt and turned, my eyes wide. "Mom . . ."

She stood leaning against the wall, arms crossed, with her cropped auburn hair as curly and messy as ever. Her face, weathered like Alberta's from being out in the elements, was filled with relief and—love. There was no anger, no condemnation. I had never been so happy to see her in my life. I was in her arms in an instant, resting my head on her chest even though she was shorter than me.

"Rose, Rose," she said into my hair. "Don't ever do this again. Please."

I pulled back and looked at her face, astonished to see tears spilling from her eyes. I had seen my mother tear up in the wake of the attack on the school, but never, never had I seen her outright cry. Certainly not over me. It made me want to cry too, and I uselessly tried to dry her face with Abe's scarf.

"No, no, it's okay. Don't cry," I said, taking on an odd role reversal. "I'm sorry. I won't do it again. I missed you so much."

It was true. I loved Olena Belikova. I thought she was kind and wonderful and would cherish the memories of her comforting me about Dimitri and always going out of her way to feed me. In another life, she could have been my mother-in-law. In this one, I would always regard her as a kind of foster mother.

But she wasn't my *real* mother. Janine Hathaway was. And standing there with her, I was happy—so, so happy—that I was her daughter. She wasn't perfect, but no one was, as I was learning. She was, however, good and brave and fierce and compassionate—and I think she understood me more than I realized sometimes. If I could be half the woman she was, my life would be well spent.

"I was so worried," she told me, recovering herself. "Where did you go—I mean, I know now you were in Russia . . . but why?"

"I thought . . ." I swallowed and again saw Dimitri with my stake in his chest. "Well, there was something I had to do. I thought I had to do it on my own." I wasn't sure about that last part now. True, I had accomplished my goal on my own, but I was realizing now how many people loved me and were with me. Who knew how differently things might have turned out if I'd asked for help? Maybe it would have been easier.

"I have a lot of questions," she warned.

Her voice had toughened, and I smiled in spite of myself. Now she was back to the Janine Hathaway I knew. And I loved her for it. Her eyes flitted to my face and then to my neck, and I saw her stiffen. For a panicked moment, I wondered if Oksana had missed healing one of the bite marks. The thought of my mother seeing what I'd lowered myself to in Siberia made my heart stop.

Instead, she reached out and touched the bright colors of the cashmere scarf, her face filled with wonder as much as shock. "This . . . this is Ibrahim's scarf . . . it's a family heirloom. . . ."

"No, it belongs to this mobster guy named Abe. . . ."

I stopped as soon as the name crossed my lips. Abe. Ibrahim. Hearing them both out loud made me realize how similar they were. Abe . . . Abe was short for Abraham in English. Abraham, Ibrahim. There was only a slight variation in the vowels. Abraham was a common enough name in the U.S., but I'd heard Ibrahim only once before, spoken in scorn by Queen Tatiana when referring to someone my mother had been involved with. . . .

"Mom," I said disbelievingly. "You know Abe."

She was still touching the scarf, eyes filled with emotion once more—but a different kind than she'd had for me. "Yes, Rose. I know him."

"Please don't tell me . . ." Oh, man. Why couldn't I have been an illegitimate half-royal like Robert Doru? Or even the mail-man's daughter? "Please don't tell me Abe is my father. . . ."

She didn't have to tell me. It was all over her face, her expression dreamily

recalling some other time and place—some time and place that had undoubtedly involved my conception. Ugh.

"Oh God," I said. "I'm Zmey's daughter. Zmey Junior. Zmeyette, even."

That got her attention. She looked up at me. "What on earth are you talking about?"

"Nothing," I said. I was stunned, trying desperately to assimilate this new piece of data into my worldview. I summoned a picture of that sly, bearded face, trying to hunt down family resemblance. Everyone said my facial features were like my mom's when she was younger . . . but my coloring, the dark hair and eyes . . . yes, that was the same as Abe's. I'd always known my father was Turkish. That was Abe's mystery accent, the one not Russian but still foreign to my ears. Ibrahim must be the Turkish version of Abraham.

"How?" I asked. "How in the world did you get involved with someone like that?"

She looked offended. "Ibrahim is a wonderful man. You don't know him like I do."

"Obviously." I hesitated. "Mom . . . you must know. What is it that Abe does for a living?"

"He's a businessman. And he knows and does favors for a lot of people, which is why he has the influence he does."

"But what kind of business? I've heard it's illegal. It's not . . . oh God. Please tell me he isn't selling blood whores or something."

"What?" She looked shocked. "No. Of course not."

"But he is doing illegal things."

"Who's to say? He's never actually been *caught* for anything illegal."

"I swear, you almost sounded like you were trying to make a joke." I never would have expected her to defend a criminal, but I knew better than most how love could drive us to crazy acts.

"If he wants to tell you, he'll tell you. End of story, Rose. Besides, you certainly keep your share of secrets too. You two have a lot in common."

"Are you kidding? He's arrogant, sarcastic, likes to intimidate people, and—oh." Okay. Maybe she had a point.

A small half-smile played upon her lips. "I never really expected you to meet this way. I never expected you to meet, period. We both thought it'd be best if he wasn't in your life."

A new thought occurred to me. "It was you, wasn't it? You hired him to find me."

"What? I contacted him when you went missing . . . but I certainly didn't hire him."

"Then who did?" I wondered. "He said he was working for someone."

Her lovestruck, reminiscent smile turned wry. "Rose, Ibrahim Mazur doesn't work for anyone. He's not the kind of person you can hire."

"But he said . . . wait. Why was he following me? Are you saying he was lying?"

"Well," she admitted, "it wouldn't be the first time. If he was following you, it wasn't because anyone was making him or paying him. He did it because he *wanted* to. He wanted to find you and make sure you were okay. He made sure all his contacts knew to look out for you."

I replayed my brief history with Abe. Shadowy, taunting, infuriating. But he'd driven out into the night to get me when I'd been attacked, been adamant in his goal to get me back to school and safety, and had apparently gifted me with an heirloom because he thought I'd get cold on my way home. *He's a wonderful man,* my mother had said.

I supposed there were worse fathers to have.

"Rose, there you are. What's taking so long?" My mom and I turned as Lissa entered the lobby, her face lighting up when she saw me. "Come on—both of you. The food's going to get cold. And you won't believe what Adrian got."

My mom and I exchanged a quick look, neither of us needing to speak. We had a long conversation ahead of us, but it would have to wait.

I have no idea how Adrian had arranged it, but when we got to the lounge, there was Chinese food set up. The Academy almost never served it, and even then, it just never tasted . . . right. But this was the good stuff. Bowls and bowls of sweet-and-sour chicken and egg foo young. In a corner garbage can, I saw some restaurant takeout cartons with an address in Missoula printed on the side.

"How the hell did you get that here?" I demanded. Not only that, it was still warm.

"Don't question these things, Rose," said Adrian, loading up his plate with porkfried rice. He seemed very pleased with himself. "Just roll with it. Once Alberta gets your paperwork settled, we'll eat like this every day."

I stopped mid-bite. "How do you know about that?"

He merely winked. "When you have nothing to do but hang out on campus all the time, you kind of pick things up."

Lissa glanced between the two of us. She'd been in class all day, and we hadn't had much time to talk. "What's this?"

"Alberta wants me to enroll again and graduate," I explained.

Lissa nearly dropped her plate. "Then do it!"

My mother looked equally startled. "She'll let you?"

"That's what she told me," I said.

"Then do it!" my mother exclaimed.

"You know," mused Adrian, "I kind of liked the idea of us going on the road together."

"Whatever," I shot back. "You probably wouldn't let me drive."

"Stop this." My mother was firmly back to her old self, no grief over her daughter's departure or wistfulness for a lost lover. "You need to take this seriously. Your future's at stake." She nodded toward Lissa. "Her future's at stake. Finishing your education here and going on to be a guardian is the—"

"Yes," I said.

"Yes?" she asked, puzzled.

I smiled. "Yes, I agree."

"You agree . . . with me?" I don't think my mom could ever recall that happening. Neither could I, for that matter.

"Yup. I'll take the trials, graduate, and become as respectable a member of society as I can. Not that it sounds like much fun," I teased. I kept my tone light, but inside, I knew I needed this. I needed to be back with people who loved me. I needed a new purpose, or else I would never get over Dimitri. I

would never stop seeing his face or hearing his voice.

Beside me, Lissa gasped and clasped her hands together. Her joy flooded into me. Adrian didn't wear his emotions as openly, but I could see he too was pleased at having me around. My mom still looked kind of stunned. I think she was used to me being unreasonable—which, usually, I was.

"You'll really stay?" she asked.

"Good God." I laughed. "How many times do I have to say it? Yes, I'll go back to school."

"And *stay*?" she prompted. "The full two and a half months?"

"Isn't that implied?"

Her face was hard—and very momlike. "I want to know for sure you aren't going to up and run away again. You'll stay and finish school no matter what? Stay until you graduate? Do you promise?"

I met her eyes, surprised at her intensity. "Yes, yes. I promise."

"Excellent," she said. "You'll be glad you did this down the road." Her words were guardian-formal, but in her eyes, I saw love and joy.

We finished dinner and helped stack dishes for the building's cleaning service. While scraping uneaten food into a trash can, I felt Adrian beside me.

"This is very domestic of you," he said. "It's kind of hot, really. Giving me all sorts of fantasies about you in an apron vacuuming my house."

"Oh, Adrian, how I've missed you," I said with an eye roll. "I don't suppose you're helping?"

"Nah. I helped when I ate everything on my plate. No mess that way." He paused. "And yes, you're welcome."

I laughed. "You know, it's a good thing you didn't say much when I promised Mom I'd stay here. I might have decided otherwise."

"Not sure if you could have stood up to her. Your mom seems like someone who gets her way a lot." He cast a covert look to where Lissa and my mom stood talking across the room. He lowered his voice. "It must run in the family. In fact, maybe I should get her help on something."

"Getting a hold of illegal cigarettes?"

"Asking her daughter out."

I nearly dropped the plate I held. "You've asked me out tons of times."

"Not really. I've made inappropriate suggestions and frequently pushed for nudity. But I've never asked you out on a real date. And, if memory serves, you did say you'd give me a fair chance once I let you clean out my trust fund."

"I didn't clean it out," I scoffed.

But standing there, looking at him, I remembered that I had said that if I survived my quest for Dimitri, I'd give Adrian a shot. I would have said anything to get the money I needed then, but now, I saw Adrian through new eyes. I wasn't ready to marry him by any stretch of the imagination, nor did I fully consider him reliable boyfriend material. I didn't even know if I wanted a boyfriend ever. But he had been a good friend to me and everyone else throughout all of this chaos. He'd been kind and steady, and yeah, I couldn't deny it . . . even with a fading black eye, he was still extraordinarily handsome.

And while it shouldn't have mattered, Lissa had gotten it out from him that

a lot of his infatuation with Avery had been compulsion-induced. He'd liked her and hadn't been ruling out a romantic attachment, but her powers had cranked up the intensity more than he actually felt. Or so he claimed. If I were a guy and all that had happened to me, I'd probably say I'd been under the influence of magic too.

Yet from the way he looked at me now, I found it hard to believe anyone had taken my place for him in this last month or so.

"Make me an offer," I said at last. "Write it up, and give me a point-by-point outline of why you're a good would-be suitor."

He started to laugh, then saw my face. "Seriously? That's like homework. There's a reason I'm not in college."

I snapped my fingers. "Get to it, Ivashkov. I want to see you put in a good day's work."

I expected a joke or a brush-off until later, but instead, he said, "Okay."

"Okay?" Now I felt like my mom had earlier, when I'd quickly agreed with her.

"Yep. I'm going to go back to my room right now to start drafting my assignment."

I stared incredulously as he reached for his coat. I had *never* seen Adrian move that fast when any kind of labor was involved. Oh no. What had I gotten myself into?

He suddenly paused and reached into his coat pocket with an exasperated smile. "Actually, I already practically wrote you an essay. Nearly forgot." He produced a piece of folded paper and waved it in the air. "You have got to get your own phone. I'm not going to be your secretary anymore."

"What is that?"

"Some foreign guy called me earlier . . . said my number was in his phone's memory." Again, Adrian eyed Lissa and my mom. They were still deep in conversation. "He said he had a message for you and didn't want me to tell anyone else. He made me write it out and read it back to him. You're the only person I'd do that for, you know. I think I'm going to mention it when I write up my dating proposal."

"Will you just hand it over?"

He gave me the note with a wink, sketched me a bow, and then said goodbye to Lissa and my mom. I kind of wondered if he really was going to go write up a dating proposal. Mostly, my attention was on the note. I had no doubt who had called him. I'd used Abe's phone to dial Adrian in Novosibirsk and had later told Abe about Adrian's financial involvement in my trip. Apparently, my father—ugh, that was still an unreal thought—had decided that made Adrian trustworthy, though I wondered why my mom couldn't have been used as a messenger.

I unfolded the note, and it took me a few seconds to decipher Adrian's writing. If he did write me a dating proposal, I really hoped he would type it. The note read:

> *Sent a message to Robert's brother. He told me there was nothing I could offer that would make him reveal Robert's location—and believe me, I have much to offer. But he said as long as he had to spend the rest of his life in there, then the information would die with him. Thought you'd like to know.*

It was hardly the essay Adrian had made it out to be. It was also a bit cryptic, but then, Abe wouldn't want its contents easily understandable to

Adrian. To me, the meaning was clear. Robert's brother was Victor Dashkov. Abe had somehow gotten a message to Victor in whatever horrible, remote prison he was locked away in. (Somehow, it didn't surprise me that Abe could pull that off.) Abe had no doubt attempted one of his trades with Victor in order to find out where Robert was, but Victor had refused. No surprise there either. Victor wasn't the most helpful of people, and I couldn't entirely blame him now. The guy was locked up for life "in there"—in prison. What could anyone offer a condemned man that would really make a difference in his life?

I sighed and put the note away, somehow touched that Abe had done this for me, as futile as it was. And again, the same argument came to mind. Even if Victor had given up Robert's location, what did it matter? The farther I got from the events in Russia, the more ridiculous it became to even consider turning a Strigoi back to his original form. Only true death could free them, only death . . .

My mom's voice saved me before I could begin reliving the bridge scene once more in my head. She told me she had to leave but promised we'd talk later. As soon as she was gone, Lissa and I made sure everything was set in the lounge before heading off to my room. She and I still had a lot of talking to do too. We went upstairs, and I wondered when they'd move me out of guest housing and back to the dorm. Probably whenever Alberta finished with the red tape. It still seemed impossible to accept that I was going to be able to return to my old life and move on from all that had happened in the last month or so.

"Did Adrian give you a love note?" Lissa asked me. Her voice was teasing, but through the bond, I knew she still worried about me grieving for Dimitri.

"Not yet," I said. "I'll explain later."

Outside my room, one of the building attendants was just about to knock on the door. When she saw me, she held out a thick padded envelope. "I was just bringing this to you. It arrived in today's mail."

"Thanks," I said.

I took it from her and looked at it. My name and St. Vladimir's address were printed in neat writing, which I found odd, since my arrival here had been sudden. There was no return address, but it bore Russian postmarks and delivery through global overnight mail.

"Do you know who it's from?" Lissa asked once the woman was gone.

"I don't know. I met a lot of people in Russia." It could have been from Olena, Mark, or Sydney. Yet . . . something I couldn't quite explain set my senses on high alert.

I tore open one side and reached in. My hand closed around something cold and metallic. I knew before I even pulled it out what it was. It was a silver stake.

"Oh God," I said

I rolled the stake around, running my finger over the engraved geometric pattern at its base. There was no question. One-of-a-kind. This was the stake I'd taken from the vault in Galina's house. The one I'd—

"Why would someone send you a stake?" asked Lissa.

I didn't answer and instead pulled out the envelope's next item: a small note card. There, in handwriting I knew all too well, was:

You forgot another lesson: Never turn your back until you know your enemy is dead. Looks like we'll have to

go over the lesson again the next time I see you—which will be soon.
Love, D.

"Oh," I said, nearly dropping the card. "This is not good."

The world spun for a moment, and I closed my eyes, taking a deep breath. For the hundredth time, I ran through the events of the night I'd escaped from Dimitri. Every other time, my emotions and attention were always on the look on his face when I stabbed him, the sight of his body falling into that black water. Now my mind summoned up the details of the struggle. I recalled how his last-minute dodge had interfered with my shot at his heart. For a moment out there, I hadn't thought I'd gotten the stake in hard enough—until I'd seen his face go slack and watched him fall.

But I really *hadn't* gotten the stake in hard enough. My first instinct had been right, but things had happened too fast. He'd fallen . . . and then what? Had the stake been loose enough to fall out on its own? Had he been able to pull it out? Had the river's impact knocked it out?

"All those practice dummies, all for nothing," I muttered, recalling how Dimitri had drilled me over and over to plunge a stake into the chest so it would get past the ribs and into the heart.

"Rose," exclaimed Lissa. I had a feeling this wasn't the first time she'd said my name. "What's going on?"

The most important staking of my life . . . and I had messed it up. What would happen now? *Looks like we'll have to go over the lesson again the next time I see you—which will be soon.*

I didn't know what to feel. Despair that I hadn't released Dimitri's soul and fulfilled the promise I'd secretly made to him? Relief that I hadn't killed the man I loved? And always, always that question: Would he have said he loved me if we'd had a few moments more?

I still had no answers. My emotions were running crazy, and I needed to put them on hold and analyze what I knew here.

First: two and a half months. I'd promised my mom two and a half months. No action until then.

Meanwhile, Dimitri was still out there, still a Strigoi. As long as he was loose in the world, there would be no peace for me. No closure. Looking at that card again, I realized I would have no peace even if I tried to ignore him. I understood the card's message.

Dimitri was coming for *me* this time. And something told me that I had blown my chance at being turned Strigoi. He was coming to kill me. What had he said when I escaped the manor? That there was no way we could both be alive in the world?

And yet, maybe we could. . . .

When I didn't answer her right away, Lissa's worry grew. "Your face is freaking me out a little. What are you thinking?"

"Do you believe in fairy tales?" I asked, looking up into her eyes. Even as I said the words, I could imagine Mark's disapproval.

"What . . . what kind of fairy tales?"

"The kind you aren't supposed to waste your life on."

"I don't understand," she said. "I'm totally lost. Tell me what's going on. What can I do?"

Two and a half months. I had to stay here for two and a half months—it

seemed like forever. But I'd promised my mom that I would, and I refused to be rash again—particularly with the stakes so high now. Promises. I was drowning in promises. I'd even promised Lissa something.

"Did you mean it before? You want to go with me on my next crazy quest? No matter what?"

"Yes." There was no uncertainty or hesitation in the word, no wavering in her steady green eyes. Of course, I wondered if she'd feel the same way later when she found out what it was we were going to do.

What could anyone offer a condemned man that would really make a difference in his life?

I'd pondered that earlier, trying to figure out what could get Victor Dashkov to talk. Victor had told Abe there was nothing anyone could offer that would make him give up the information about his brother's alleged ability to restore Strigoi. Victor was serving a life sentence; no bribe could matter to him anymore. But one thing could, I realized. Freedom. And there was only one way to achieve that.

We were going to have to break Victor Dashkov out of prison.

But I decided not to mention that to Lissa quite yet.

All I knew for now was that I had a fleeting shot at saving Dimitri. Mark had said it was a fairy tale, but I had to take the chance. The question was: how long did I have until Dimitri came to kill me? How long did I have to figure out if the impossible was actually possible? That was the real issue. Because if Dimitri showed up before I had a chance to find the dragon in this story—Victor—things were going to get ugly. Maybe this whole Robert thing was one big lie, but even if it wasn't . . . well, the clock was ticking. If Dimitri came for me before I could get to Victor and Robert, I'd have to fight him again. No question. I couldn't wait for this magical cure. I'd have to kill Dimitri for real this time and lose any chance I might have to bring back my prince. Damn.

It's a good thing I work well under pressure.

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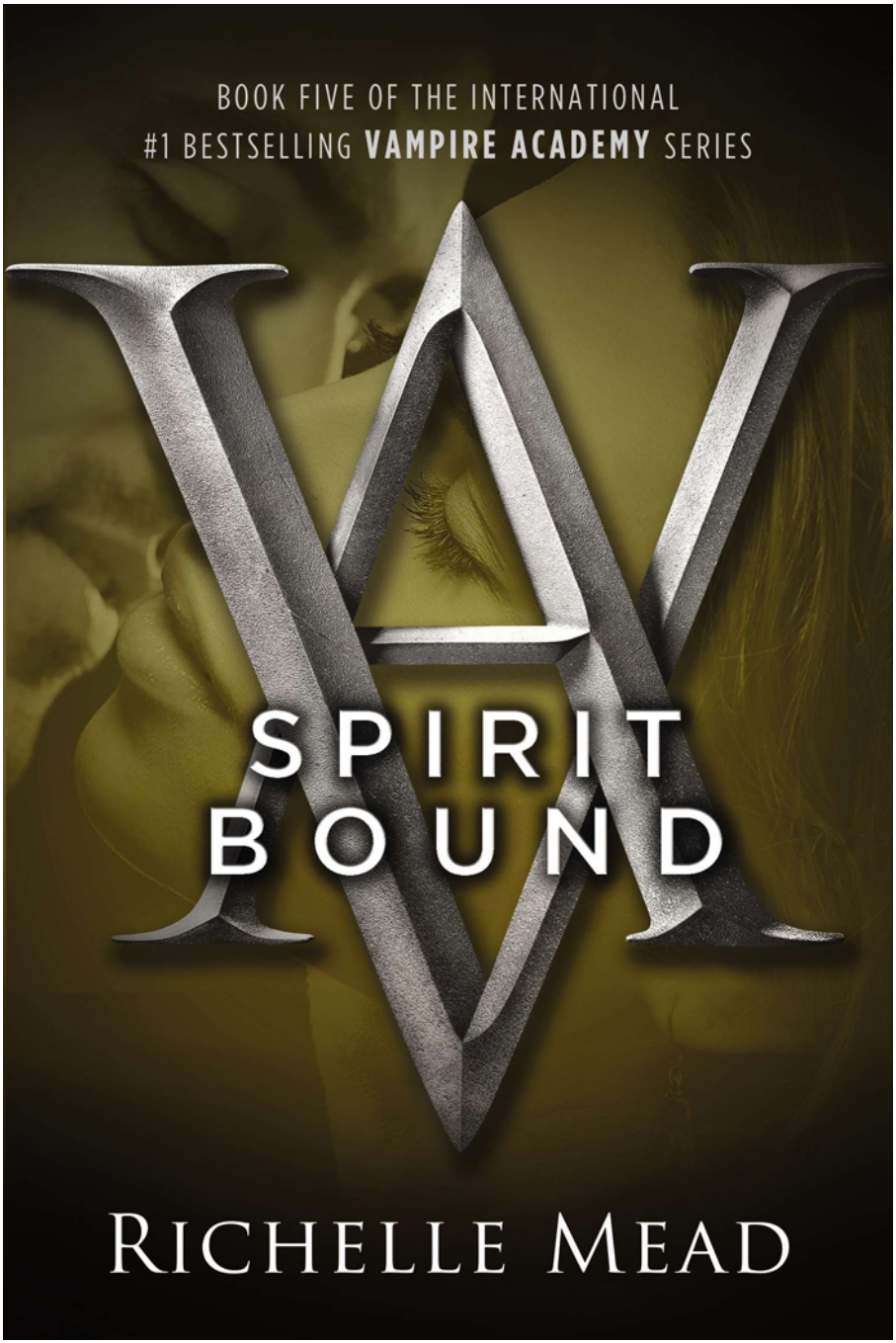
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Version_9

For my agent, Jim McCarthy.
Thanks for doing all the hard stuff.
These books couldn't happen
without you!

ONE

THERE'S A BIG DIFFERENCE BETWEEN death threats and love letters—even if the person writing the death threats still claims to actually love you. Of course, considering *I* once tried to kill someone I loved, maybe I had no right to judge.

Today's letter had been perfectly timed, not that I should have expected any less. I'd read it four times so far, and even though I was running late, I couldn't help but read it a fifth time.

My dearest Rose,

One of the few downsides to being awakened is that we no longer require sleep; therefore we also no longer dream. It's a shame, because if I could dream, I know I'd dream about you. I'd dream about the way you smell and how your dark hair feels like silk between my fingers. I'd dream about the smoothness of your skin and the fierceness of your lips when we kiss.

Without dreams, I have to be content with my own imagination—which is almost as good. I can picture all of those things perfectly, as well as how it'll be when I take your life from this world. It's something I regret having to do, but you've made my choice inevitable. Your refusal to join me in eternal life and love leaves no other course of action, and I can't allow someone as dangerous as you to live. Besides, even if I forced your awakening, you now have so many enemies among the Strigoi that one of them would kill you. If you must die, it'll be by my hand. No one else's.

Nonetheless, I wish you well today as you take your trials—not that you need any luck. If they're actually making you take them, it's a waste of everyone's time. You're the best in that group, and by this evening you'll wear your promise mark. Of course, that means you'll be all that much more of a challenge when we meet again—which I'll definitely enjoy.

And we will *be meeting again. With graduation, you'll be turned out of the Academy, and once you're outside the wards, I'll find you. There is no place in this world you can hide from me. I'm watching.*

Love,
Dimitri

Despite his "warm wishes" I didn't really find the letter inspiring as I tossed it onto my bed and blearily left the room. I tried not to let his words get to me, though it was kind of impossible to not be creeped out by something like that. *There is no place in this world you can hide from me.*

I didn't doubt it. I knew Dimitri had spies. Since my former instructor-turned-lover had been turned into an evil, undead vampire, he'd also become a sort of leader among them—something I'd helped speed along when I killed off his former boss. I suspected a lot of his spies were humans, watching for

me to step outside my school's borders. No Strigoi could have stayed on a twenty-four-hour stakeout. Humans could, and I'd recently learned that plenty of humans were willing to serve the Strigoi in exchange for the promise of being turned someday. Those humans considered eternal life worth corrupting their souls and killing off others to survive. Those humans made me sick.

But the humans weren't what made my steps falter as I walked through grass that had turned bright green with summer's touch. It was Dimitri. Always Dimitri. Dimitri, the man I'd loved. Dimitri, the Strigoi I wanted to save. Dimitri, the monster I'd most likely have to kill. The love we'd shared always burned within me, no matter how often I told myself to move on, no matter how much the world did think I'd moved on. He was always with me, always on my mind, always making me question myself.

"You look like you're ready to face an army."

I shifted out of my dark thoughts. I'd been so fixated on Dimitri and his letter that I'd been walking across campus, oblivious to the world, and hadn't noticed my best friend, Lissa, falling into step with me, a teasing smile on her face. Her catching me by surprise was a rarity because we shared a psychic bond, one that always kept me aware of her presence and feelings. I had to be pretty distracted to not notice her, and if ever there was a distraction, it was someone wanting to kill me.

I gave Lissa what I hoped was a convincing smile. She knew what had happened to Dimitri and how he was now waiting to kill me after I'd tried—and failed—to kill him. Nonetheless, the letters I got from him every week worried her, and she had enough to deal with in her life without my undead stalker to add to the list.

"I kind of *am* facing an army," I pointed out. It was early evening, but late summer still found the sun up in the Montana sky, bathing us in golden light as we walked. I loved it, but as a Moroi—a peaceful, living vampire—Lissa would eventually grow weak and uncomfortable in it.

She laughed and tossed her platinum hair over one shoulder. The sun lit up the pale color into angelic brilliance. "I suppose. I didn't think you'd really be all that worried."

I could understand her reasoning. Even Dimitri had said these would be a waste of my time. After all, I'd gone to Russia to search for him and had faced real Strigoi—killing a number of them on my own. Maybe I shouldn't have been afraid of the upcoming tests, but all the fanfare and expectation suddenly pressed in upon me. My heart rate increased. What if I couldn't do it? What if I wasn't as good as I thought I was? The guardians who would challenge me out here might not be true Strigoi, but they were skilled and had been fighting a lot longer than me. Arrogance could get me into a lot of trouble, and if I failed, I'd be doing it in front of all the people who cared about me. All the people who had such faith in me.

One other thing also concerned me.

"I'm worried about how these grades will affect my future," I said. That was the truth. The trials were the final exam for a novice guardian like me. They ensured I could graduate from St. Vladimir's Academy and take my place with true guardians who defended Moroi from the Strigoi. The trials pretty much decided which Moroi a guardian would be assigned to.

Through our bond, I felt Lissa's compassion—and her worry. "Alberta thinks there's a good chance we can stay together—that you'll still be my guardian."

I grimaced. "I think Alberta was saying that to keep me in school." I'd dropped out to hunt Dimitri a few months ago and then returned—something that didn't look good on my academic record. There was also the small fact that the Moroi queen, Tatiana, hated me and would probably be going out of her way to influence my assignment—but that was another story. "I think Alberta knows the only way they'd let me protect you is if I was the last guardian on earth. And even then, my odds would still be pretty slim."

Ahead of us, the roar of a crowd grew loud. One of the school's many sports fields had been transformed into an arena on par with something from Roman gladiatorial days. The bleachers had been built up, expanded from simple wooden seats to luxuriously cushioned benches with awnings to shade the Moroi from the sun. Banners surrounded the field, their bright colors visible from here as they whipped in the wind. I couldn't see them yet, but I knew there would be some type of barracks built near the stadium's entrance where novices waited, nerves on edge. The field itself would have turned into an obstacle course of dangerous tests. And from the sound of those deafening cheers, plenty were already there to witness this event.

"I'm not giving up hope," Lissa said. Through the bond, I knew she meant it. It was one of the wonderful things about her—a steadfast faith and optimism that weathered the most terrible ordeals. It was a sharp contrast to my recent cynicism. "And I've got something that might help you out today."

She came to a stop and reached into her jeans pocket, producing a small silver ring scattered with tiny stones that looked like peridots. I didn't need any bond to understand what she was offering.

"Oh, Liss . . . I don't know. I don't want any, um, unfair advantage."

Lissa rolled her eyes. "That's not the problem, and you know it. This one's fine, I swear."

The ring she offered me was a charm, infused with the rare type of magic she wielded. All Moroi had control of one of five elements: earth, air, water, fire, or spirit. Spirit was the rarest—so rare, it had been forgotten over the centuries. Then Lissa and a few others had recently surfaced with it. Unlike the other elements, which were more physical in nature, spirit was tied into the mind and all sorts of psychic phenomena. No one fully understood it.

Making charms with spirit was something Lissa had only recently begun to experiment with—and she wasn't very good at it. Her best spirit ability was healing, so she kept trying to make healing charms. The last one had been a bracelet that singed my arm.

"This one works. Only a little, but it'll help keep the darkness away during the trial."

She spoke lightly, but we both knew the seriousness of her words. With all of spirit's gifts came a cost: a darkness that showed itself now as anger and confusion, and eventually led to insanity. Darkness that sometimes bled over into me through our bond. Lissa and I had been told that with charms and her healing, we could fight it off. That was also something we had yet to master.

I gave her a faint smile, moved by her concern, and accepted the ring. It didn't scald my hand, which I took as a promising sign. It was tiny and only fit

on my pinky. I felt nothing whatsoever as it slid on. Sometimes that happened with healing charms. Or it could mean the ring was completely ineffectual. Either way, no harm done.

"Thanks," I said. I felt delight sweep through her, and we continued walking.

I held my hand out before me, admiring the way the green stones glittered. Jewelry wasn't a great idea in the kind of physical ordeals I'd be facing, but I would have gloves on to cover it.

"Hard to believe that after this, we'll be done here and out in the real world," I mused aloud, not really considering my words.

Beside me, Lissa stiffened, and I immediately regretted speaking. "Being out in the real world" meant Lissa and I were going to undertake a task she'd—unhappily—promised to help me with a couple months ago.

While in Siberia, I'd learned there might be a way to restore Dimitri back to being a dhampir like me. It was a long shot—possibly a lie—and considering the way he was fixated on killing me, I had no illusions that I would have any other choice but to kill him if it came down to him or me. But if there was a way I might save him before that happened, I had to find out.

Unfortunately, the only lead we had to making this miracle come true was through a criminal. Not just any criminal either: Victor Dashkov, a royal Moroi who had tortured Lissa and committed all sorts of other atrocities that had made our lives hell. Justice had been served, and Victor was locked away in prison, which complicated things. We'd learned that so long as he was destined for a life behind bars, he saw no reason to share what he knew about his half-brother—the only person who had once allegedly saved a Strigoi. I'd decided—possibly illogically—that Victor might give up the information if we offered him the one thing no one else could: freedom.

This idea was not foolproof, for a number of reasons. First, I didn't know if it would work. That was kind of a big thing. Second, I had no idea how to stage a prison break, let alone where his prison even was. And finally, there was the fact that we would be releasing our mortal enemy. That was devastating enough to me, let alone Lissa. Yet as much as the idea troubled her—and believe me, it did—she'd firmly sworn she would help me. I'd offered to free her from the promise dozens of times in the last couple months, but she'd stood firm. Of course, considering we had no way to even find the prison, her promise might not matter in the end.

I tried to fill the awkward silence between us, explaining instead that I'd really meant we'd be able to celebrate her birthday in style next week. My attempts were interrupted by Stan, one of my longtime instructors. "Hathaway!" he barked, coming from the direction of the field. "Nice of you to join us. Get in there now!"

Thoughts of Victor vanished from Lissa's mind. Lissa gave me a quick hug. "Good luck," she whispered. "Not that you need it."

Stan's expression told me that this ten-second goodbye was ten seconds too long. I gave Lissa a grin by way of thanks, and then she headed off to find our friends in the stands while I scurried after Stan.

"You're lucky you aren't one of the first ones," he growled. "People were even making bets about whether you'd show."

“Really?” I asked cheerfully. “What kind of odds are there on that? Because I can still change my mind and put down my own bet. Make a little pocket money.”

His narrowed eyes shot me a warning that needed no words as we entered the waiting area adjacent to the field, across from the stands. It had always amazed me in past years how much work went into these trials, and I was no less impressed now as I saw it up close. The barrack that novices waited in was constructed out of wood, complete with a roof. The structure looked as though it had been part of the stadium forever. It had been built with remarkable speed and would be taken down equally quickly once the trials were over. A doorway about three people wide gave a partial glimpse onto the field, where one of my classmates was waiting anxiously for her name to be called. All sorts of obstacles were set up there, challenges to test balance and coordination while still having to battle and elude the adult guardians who would be lurking around objects and corners. Wooden walls had been constructed on one end of the field, creating a dark and confusing maze. Nets and shaky platforms hung across other areas, designed to test just how well we could fight under difficult conditions.

A few of the other novices crowded the doorway, hoping to get an advantage by watching those who went ahead of them. Not me. I would go in there blind, content to take on whatever they threw before me. Studying the course now would simply make me overthink and panic. Calm was what I needed now.

So I leaned against one of the barrack walls and watched those around me. It appeared that I really had been the last to show up, and I wondered if people had actually lost money betting on me. Some of my classmates whispered in clusters. Some were doing stretches and warm-up exercises. Others stood with instructors who had been mentors. Those teachers spoke intently to their students, giving last-minute words of advice. I kept hearing words like *focus* and *calm down*.

Seeing the instructors made my heart clench. Not so long ago, that was how I’d pictured this day. I’d imagined Dimitri and me standing together, with him telling me to take this seriously and not to lose my cool when I was out on the field. Alberta had done a fair amount of mentoring for me since I’d returned from Russia, but as captain, she was out on the field herself now, busy with all sorts of responsibilities. She had no time to come in here and hold my hand. Friends of mine who might have offered comfort—Eddie, Meredith, and others—were wrapped up in their own fears. I was alone.

Without her or Dimitri—or, well, anyone—I felt a surprising ache of loneliness flow through me. This wasn’t right. I shouldn’t have been alone. Dimitri should have been here with me. That’s how it was supposed to have been. Closing my eyes, I allowed myself to pretend he was really there, only inches away as we spoke.

“Don’t worry, comrade. I can do this blindfolded. Hell, maybe I actually will. Do you have anything I can use? If you’re nice to me, I’ll even let you tie it on.” Since this fantasy would have taken place after we’d slept together, there was a strong possibility that he would have later helped me take off that blindfold—among other things.

I could perfectly picture the exasperated shake of his head that would earn me. “Rose, I swear, sometimes it feels like every day with you is my own personal trial.”

But I knew he’d smile anyway, and the look of pride and encouragement he’d give me as I headed toward the field would be all I needed to get through the tests—

“Are you meditating?”

I opened my eyes, astonished at the voice. “Mom? What are you doing here?”

My mother, Janine Hathaway, stood in front of me. She was just a few inches shorter than me but had enough fight in her for someone twice my size. The dangerous look on her tanned face dared anyone to bring on a challenge. She gave me a wry smile and put one hand on her hip.

“Did you honestly think I wouldn’t come to watch you?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted, feeling kind of guilty for doubting her. She and I hadn’t had much contact over the years, and it was only recent events—most of them bad—that had begun to reestablish our connection. Most of the time, I still didn’t know how to feel about her. I oscillated between a little girl’s need for her absent mother and a teenager’s resentment over abandonment. I also wasn’t entirely sure if I’d forgiven her for the time she “accidentally” punched me in a mock fight. “I figured you’d have, you know, more important things to do.”

“There’s no way I could miss this.” She inclined her head toward the stands, making her auburn curls sway. “Neither could your father.”

“*What*?”

I hurried toward the doorway and peered out onto the fields. My view of the stands wasn’t fantastic, thanks to all the obstacles on the field, but it was good enough. There he was: Abe Mazur. He was easy to spot, with his black beard and mustache, as well as the emerald green scarf knotted over his dress shirt. I could even barely make out the glint of his gold earring. He had to be melting in this heat, but I figured it would take more than a little sweat for him to tame down his flashy fashion sense.

If my relationship with my mother was sketchy, my relationship with my father was practically nonexistent. I’d met him back in May, and even then, it wasn’t until after I’d gotten back that I found out I was his daughter. All dhampirs had one Moroi parent, and he was mine. I still wasn’t sure how I felt about him. Most of his background remained a mystery, but there were plenty of rumors that he was involved with illegal business. People also acted like he was the kneecap-breaking type, and though I’d seen little evidence of this, I didn’t find it surprising. In Russia, they called him Zmey: the serpent.

While I stared at him in astonishment, my mom strolled over to my side. “He’ll be happy you made it in time,” she said. “He’s running some big wager on whether you’d show. He put his money on you, if that makes you feel any better.”

I groaned. “Of course. Of course he’d be the bookie behind the pool. I should have known as soon as—” My jaw dropped. “Is he talking to Adrian?”

Yup. Sitting beside Abe was Adrian Ivashkov—my more-or-less boyfriend. Adrian was a royal Moroi—and another spirit user like Lissa. He’d been crazy

about me (and often just crazy) ever since we first met, but I'd had eyes only for Dimitri. After the failure in Russia, I'd returned and promised to give Adrian a shot. To my surprise, things had been . . . good between us. Great, even. He'd written me up a proposal of why dating him was a sound decision. It had included things like "I'll give up cigarettes unless I really, *really* need one" and "I'll unleash romantic surprises every week, such as: an impromptu picnic, roses, or a trip to Paris—but not actually any of those things because now they're not surprises."

Being with him wasn't like it had been with Dimitri, but then, I supposed, no two relationships could ever be exactly alike. They were different men, after all. I still woke up all the time, aching over the loss of Dimitri and our love. I tormented myself over my failure to kill him in Siberia and free him from his undead state. Still, that despair didn't mean my romantic life was over—something it had taken me a while to accept. Moving on was hard, but Adrian did make me happy. And for now, that was enough.

But that didn't necessarily mean I wanted him cozying up to my pirate mobster father either.

"He's a bad influence!" I protested.

My mother snorted. "I doubt Adrian will influence Abe that much."

"Not Adrian! *Abe*. Adrian's trying to be on good behavior. Abe will mess everything up." Along with smoking, Adrian had sworn he'd quit drinking and other vices in his dating proposal. I squinted at him and Abe across the crowded stands, trying to figure out what topic could be so interesting. "What are they talking about?"

"I think that's the least of your problems right now." Janine Hathaway was nothing if not practical. "Worry less about them and more about that field."

"Do you think they're talking about *me*?"

"Rose!" My mother gave me a light punch on the arm, and I dragged my eyes back to her. "You have to take this seriously. Keep calm, and don't get distracted."

Her words were so like what I'd imagined Dimitri saying that a small smile crept onto my face. I wasn't alone out here after all.

"What's so funny?" she asked warily.

"Nothing," I said, giving her a hug. She was stiff at first and then relaxed, actually hugging me back briefly before stepping away. "I'm glad you're here."

My mother wasn't the overly affectionate type, and I'd caught her off guard. "Well," she said, obviously flustered, "I told you I wouldn't miss this."

I glanced back at the stands. "Abe, on the other hand, I'm not so sure of."

Or . . . wait. An odd idea came to me. No, not so odd, actually. Shady or not, Abe had connections—ones extensive enough to slip a message to Victor Dashkov in prison. Abe had been the one to ask for info about Robert Doru, Victor's spirit-wielding brother, as a favor to me. When Victor had sent back the message saying he had no reason to help Abe with what he needed, I'd promptly written off my father's assistance and jumped to my prison-break idea. But now—

"Rosemarie Hathaway!"

It was Alberta who called me, her voice ringing loud and clear. It was like a trumpet, a call to battle. All thoughts of Abe and Adrian—and yes, even

Dimitri—vanished from my mind. I think my mother wished me good luck, but the exact wording was lost on me as I strode toward Alberta and the field. Adrenaline surged through me. All my attention was now on what lay ahead: the test that would finally make me a guardian.

TWO

MY TRIALS WERE A BLUR.

You'd think, seeing as they were the most important part of my education at St. Vladimir's, that I'd remember everything in perfect, crystalline detail. Yet my earlier thoughts were kind of realized. How could these measure up to what I'd already faced? How could these mock fights compare to a mob of Strigoi descending on our school? I'd had to stand against overwhelming odds, not knowing if those I loved were alive or dead. And how could I fear a so-called battle with one of the school's instructors after having fought Dimitri? He'd been lethal as a dhampir and worse as a Strigoi.

Not that I meant to make light of the trials. They were serious. Novices failed them all the time, and I refused to be one of them. I was attacked on all sides, by guardians who'd been fighting and defending Moroi since before I was born. The arena wasn't flat, which complicated everything. They'd filled it with contraptions and obstacles, beams and steps that tested my balance—including a bridge that painfully reminded me of that last night I'd seen Dimitri. I'd pushed him after plunging a silver stake into his heart—a stake that had fallen out during his plummet to the river below.

The arena's bridge was a bit different from the solid wooden one upon which Dimitri and I had fought in Siberia. This one was rickety, a badly constructed path of wooden planks with only rope rails for support. Every step made the entire bridge swing and shake, and holes in the boards showed me where former classmates had (unfortunately for them) discovered weak spots. The test they assigned me on the bridge was probably the worst of all. My goal was to get a "Moroi" away from a group of "Strigoi" that were in pursuit. My Moroi was being played by Daniel, a new guardian who had come with others to the school to replace those killed in the attack. I didn't know him very well, but for this exercise, he was playing completely docile and helpless—even a little afraid, just as any Moroi I was guarding might have been.

He gave me a little resistance about stepping onto the bridge, and I used my calmest, most coaxing voice to finally get him to walk out ahead of me. Apparently they were testing people skills as well as combat skills. Not far behind us on the course, I knew the guardians acting as Strigoi were approaching.

Daniel stepped out, and I shadowed him, still giving him reassurances while all my senses stayed on alert. The bridge swung wildly, telling me with a jolt that our pursuers had joined us. I glanced back and saw three "Strigoi" coming after us. The guardians playing them were doing a remarkable job—moving with as much dexterity and speed as true Strigoi would. They were going to overtake us if we didn't get a move on.

"You're doing great," I told Daniel. It was hard to keep the right tone in my voice. Screaming at Moroi might put them into shock. Too much gentleness

would make them think it wasn't serious. "And I know you can move faster. We need to keep ahead of them—they're getting closer. I know you can do this. *Come on*."

I must have passed that persuasive part of the test because he did indeed pick up his speed—not quite enough to match that of our pursuers, but it was a start. The bridge shifted crazily again. Daniel yelped convincingly and froze, gripping the rope sides tightly. Ahead of him, I saw another guardian-as-Strigoi waiting on the opposite side of the bridge. I believed his name was Randall, another new instructor. I was sandwiched between him and the group at my back. But Randall stayed still, waiting on the first plank of the bridge so that he could shake it and make it harder for us.

"Keep going," I urged, my mind spinning. "You can do it."

"But there's a Strigoi there! We're trapped," Daniel exclaimed.

"Don't worry. I'll deal with him. Just move."

My voice was fierce this time, and Daniel crept forward, pushed on by my command. The next few moments required perfect timing on my part. I had to watch the "Strigoi" on both sides of us and keep Daniel in motion, all the while monitoring where we were on the bridge. When we were almost three quarters of the way across, I hissed, "Drop down on all fours right now! Hurry!"

He obeyed, coming to a halt. I immediately knelt, still speaking in an undertone: "I'm about to shout at you. Ignore it." In a louder voice, for the benefit of those coming after us, I exclaimed, "What are you doing? We can't stop!"

Daniel didn't budge, and I again spoke softly. "Good. See where the ropes connect the base to the rails? Grab them. Grab them as tightly as you can, and do *not* let go, no matter what happens. Wrap them around your hands if you have to. Do it now!"

He obeyed. The clock was ticking, and I didn't waste another moment. In one motion, while still crouched, I turned around and hacked at the ropes with a knife I'd been given along with my stake. The blade was sharp, thank God. The guardians running the trial weren't messing around. It didn't instantly slice the ropes, but I cut through them so quickly that the "Strigoi" on either side of us didn't have time to react.

The ropes snapped just as I again reminded Daniel to hold on. The two halves of the bridge swung toward the sides of wooden scaffolding, carried by the weight of the people on them. Well, ours did at least. Daniel and I had been prepared. The three pursuers behind us hadn't been. Two fell. One just barely managed to catch hold of a plank, slipping a bit before securing his grip. The actual drop was six feet, but I'd been told to regard it as fifty—a distance that would kill me and Daniel if we fell.

Against all odds, he was still clutching the rope. I was hanging on as well, and once the rope and wood were lying flat against the scaffolding's sides, I began scrambling up it like a ladder. It wasn't easy climbing over Daniel, but I did it, giving me one more chance to tell him to hang on. Randall, who'd been waiting ahead of us, hadn't fallen off. He'd had his feet on the bridge when I cut it, though, and had been surprised enough to lose his balance. Quick to recover, he was now shimmying up the ropes, trying to climb up to the solid

surface above. He was much closer to it than me, but I just managed to grab his leg and stop him. I jerked him toward me. He maintained his grip on the bridge, and we struggled. I knew I probably couldn't pull him off, but I was able to keep getting closer. At last, I let go of the knife I'd been holding and managed to get the stake from my belt—something that tested my balance. Randall's ungainly position gave me a shot at his heart, and I took it.

For the trials, we had blunt-ended stakes, ones that wouldn't pierce skin but which could be used with enough force to convince our opponents that we knew what we were doing. My alignment was perfect, and Randall, conceding it would have been a killing blow, relinquished his hold and dropped off the bridge.

That left me the painful task of coaxing Daniel to climb up. It took a long time, but again, his behavior wasn't out of character with how a scared Moroi might behave. I was just grateful he hadn't decided a real Moroi would have lost his grip and fallen.

After that challenge came many more, but I fought on, never slowing down or letting exhaustion affect me. I slipped into battle mode, my senses focused on basic instincts: *fight, dodge, kill*.

And while staying tuned to those, I still had to be innovative and not fall into a lull. Otherwise, I wouldn't be able to react to a surprise like the bridge. I managed it all, battling on with no other thoughts beyond accomplishing the tasks before me. I tried not to think of my instructors as people I knew. I treated them like Strigoi. I pulled no punches.

When it finally ended, I almost didn't realize it. I was simply standing there in the middle of the field with no more attackers coming at me. I was alone. Slowly, I became more aware of the world's details. Crowds in the stands cheering. A few instructors nodding to each other as they joined in. The pounding of my own heart.

It wasn't until a grinning Alberta tugged at my arm that I realized it was over. The test I'd waited for my entire life, finished in what felt like a blink of an eye.

"Come on," she said, wrapping her arm around my shoulder and guiding me toward the exit. "You need to get some water and sit down."

Dazed, I let her lead me off the field, around which people were still cheering and crying my name. Behind us, I heard some people saying they had to take a break and fix the bridge. She led me back to the waiting area and gently pushed me onto a bench. Someone else sat beside me and handed me a bottle of water. I looked over and saw my mother. She had an expression on her face that I had never seen before: pure, radiant pride.

"That was it?" I asked at last.

She surprised me again with genuinely amused laughter. "That was it?" she repeated. "Rose, you were out there for almost an hour. You blew through that test with flying colors—probably one of the best trials this school's ever seen."

"Really? It just seemed . . ." *Easy* wasn't quite the right word. "It was a haze, that's all."

My mom squeezed my hand. "You were amazing. I'm so, so proud of you."

The realization of it all truly, truly hit me then, and I felt a smile of my own spreading over my lips. "Now what happens?" I asked.

“Now you become a guardian.”

I’d been tattooed many times, but none of those events came close to the ceremony and fanfare that occurred while getting my promise mark. Before, I’d received *molnija* marks for kills I’d made in unexpected, tragic circumstances: fighting Strigoi in Spokane, the school attack and rescue—events that were cause for mourning, not celebration. After all those kills, we’d kind of lost count, and while guardian tattoo artists still tried to log every individual kill, they’d finally given me a star-shaped mark that was a fancy way of saying we’d lost count.

Tattooing isn’t a fast process, even if you’re getting a small one, and my entire graduating class had to get them. The ceremony took place in what was usually the Academy’s dining room, a room they were able to remarkably transform into something as grand and elaborate as we’d find at the Royal Court. Spectators—friends, family, guardians—packed the room as Alberta called our names one at a time and read our scores as we approached the tattoo artist. The scores were important. They would be made public and, along with our overall school grades, influence our assignments. Moroi could request certain grads for their guardians. Lissa had requested me, of course, but even the best scores in the world might not compensate for all the black behavioral marks on my record.

There were no Moroi at this ceremony, though, aside from the handful who had been invited as guests by the new graduates. Everyone else gathered was a dhampir: either one of the established guardians or about-to-become-guardians like me. The guests sat in the back, and the senior guardians sat near the front. My classmates and I stood the whole time, maybe as some sort of last test of endurance.

I didn’t mind. I’d changed out of my torn and dirty clothes into simple slacks and a sweater, an outfit that seemed dressy while still retaining a solemn feel. It was a good call because the air in the room was thick with tension, all faces a mix of joy at our success but also anxiety about our new and deadly role in the world. I watched with shining eyes as my friends were called up, surprised and impressed at many of the scores.

Eddie Castile, a close friend, got a particularly high score in one-on-one Moroi protection. I couldn’t help a smile as I watched the tattooist give Eddie his mark. “I wonder how he got his Moroi over the bridge,” I murmured in an undertone. Eddie was pretty resourceful.

Beside me, another friend of mine, Meredith, gave me a puzzled look. “What are you talking about?” Her voice was equally soft.

“When we were chased onto the bridge with a Moroi. Mine was Daniel.” She still looked confused, and I elaborated. “And they put Strigoi on each side?”

“I crossed the bridge,” she whispered, “but it was just me being chased. I took my Moroi through a maze.”

A glare from a nearby classmate shut us up, and I hid my frown. Maybe I wasn’t the only one who’d gone through the trial in a daze. Meredith had her facts screwed up.

When my name was called, I heard a few gasps as Alberta read my scores. I

had the highest in the class by far. I was kind of glad she didn't read my academic grades. They would have totally taken away some of the glory of the rest of my performance. I'd always done well in my combat classes, but math and history . . . well, those were a bit lacking, particularly since I always seemed to be dropping in and out of school.

My hair was pulled tightly into a bun, with every stray wisp held with hairpins so that the artist would have nothing to interfere with his work. I leaned forward to give him a good view and heard him grunt in surprise. With the back of my neck covered in marks, he'd have to be tricky. Usually a new guardian provided a blank canvas. This guy was good, though, and managed to delicately place the promise mark in the center of the nape of my neck after all. The promise mark looked like a long, stretched-out *S*, with curly ends. He fit it in between the *molnija* marks, letting it wrap around them like an embrace. The process hurt, but I kept my face blank, refusing to flinch. I was shown the final results in a mirror before he covered it up with a bandage so it would heal cleanly.

After that, I rejoined my classmates and watched as the rest of them received their tattoos. It meant standing for another two hours, but I didn't mind. My brain was still reeling with everything that had happened today. I was a guardian. A real, honest-to-goodness guardian. And with that thought came questions. What would happen now? Would my scores be good enough to erase my record of bad behavior? Would I be Lissa's guardian? And what about Victor? What about Dimitri?

I shifted uneasily as the full impact of the guardian ceremony hit me. This wasn't just about Dimitri and Victor. This was about me—about the rest of my life. School was over. I would no longer have teachers tracking my every move or correcting me when I made mistakes. All decisions would be on me when I was out protecting someone. Moroi and younger dhampirs would look to me as the authority. And I would no longer have the luxury of practicing combat one minute and lounging in my room the next. There were no clear-cut classes anymore. I would be on duty all the time. The thought was daunting, the pressure almost too great. I'd always equated graduation with freedom. Now I wasn't so sure. What new shape was my life going to take? Who would decide? And how could I reach Victor if I was assigned to guard anyone besides Lissa?

Across the room, I met Lissa's eyes among the audience. They burned with a pride that matched my mother's, and she grinned when our gazes met.

Get that look off your face, she chastised through the bond. *You shouldn't look that anxious, not today. You need to celebrate.*

I knew she was right. I could handle what was to come. My worries, which were many, could wait one more day—particularly since the exuberant mood of my friends and family ensured that I would celebrate. Abe, with that influence he always seemed to wield, had secured a small banquet room and thrown a party for me that seemed more suited to a royal debutante, not some lowly, reckless dhampir.

Before the event, I changed yet again. Prettier party clothes now seemed more appropriate than the formal *molnija* ceremony outfit. I put on a short-sleeved, emerald green wrap dress and hung my *nazar* around my neck, even

though it didn't match. The *nazar* was a small pendant that looked like an eye, with different shades of blue circling it. In Turkey, where Abe came from, it was believed to offer protection. He'd given it to my mother years ago, and she'd in turn given it to me.

By the time I'd put on makeup and brushed out my tangled hair into long, dark waves (because my tattoo bandages didn't go with the dress *at all*), I hardly looked like someone capable of fighting monsters or even throwing a punch. No—that wasn't quite true, I realized a moment later. Staring into the mirror, I was surprised to see a haunted look in my brown eyes. There was pain there, pain and loss that even the nicest dress and makeup couldn't hide.

I ignored it and set off for the party, promptly running into Adrian as soon as I stepped outside my dorm. Without a word, he swept me into his arms and smothered me with a kiss. I was totally caught off guard. It figured. Undead creatures didn't surprise me, but one flippant royal Moroi could.

And it was quite the kiss, one that I almost felt guilty about sinking into. I'd had concerns when first dating Adrian, but many of them had disappeared over time. After watching him flirt shamelessly and take nothing seriously for so long, I'd never expected to see such devotion from him in our relationship. I also hadn't expected to find my feelings for him growing—which seemed so contradictory considering I still loved Dimitri and was concocting impossible ways to save him.

I laughed when Adrian set me down. Nearby, a few younger Moroi had stopped to watch us. Moroi dating dhampirs wasn't super uncommon at our age, but a notorious dhampir dating the Moroi queen's great-nephew? That was kind of out there—especially since it was widely known how much Queen Tatiana hated me. There had been few witnesses to my last meeting with her, when she'd screamed at me to stay away from Adrian, but word of that kind of thing always gets around.

"Like the show?" I asked our voyeurs. Realizing they'd been busted, the Moroi kids hastily continued on their way. I turned back to Adrian and smiled. "What was that? It was kind of a big kiss to throw on me in public."

"That," he said grandly, "was your reward for kicking so much ass in those trials." He paused. "It was also because you look totally hot in that dress."

I gave him a wry look. "Reward, huh? Meredith's boyfriend got her diamond earrings."

He caught hold of my hand and gave an unconcerned shrug as we began to walk to the party. "You want diamonds? I'll give you diamonds. I'll shower you in them. Hell, I'll get you a gown made out of them. But it's going to be skimpy."

"I think I'll settle for the kiss after all," I said, imagining Adrian dressing me like a swimsuit model. Or a pole dancer. The jewelry reference also suddenly brought on an unwanted memory. When Dimitri had held me captive in Siberia, lulling me into blissful complacency with his bites, he'd showered me with jewelry too.

"I knew you were a badass," continued Adrian. A warm summer breeze ruffled the brown hair he so painstakingly styled each day, and with his free hand, he absentmindedly tried to arrange it back into place. "But I didn't realize just how much until I saw you dropping guardians out there."

“Does that mean you’re going to be nicer to me?” I teased.

“I’m already nice to you,” he said loftily. “Do you know how badly I want a cigarette right now? But no. I manfully suffer through nicotine withdrawal—all for you. But I think seeing you out there will make me a little more careful around you. That crazy dad of yours is kind of gonna make me cautious too.”

I groaned, recalling how Adrian and Abe had been sitting together. “God. Did you really have to hang out with him?”

“Hey, he’s awesome. A little unstable, but awesome. We got along great.” Adrian opened the door to the building we were seeking. “And he’s a badass in his way too. I mean, any other guy who wore scarves like that? He’d be laughed out of this school. Not Abe. He’d beat someone almost as badly as you would. In fact . . .” Adrian’s voice turned nervous. I gave him a surprised look.

“In fact what?”

“Well . . . Abe said he liked me. But he also made it clear what he’d do to me if I ever hurt you or did anything bad.” Adrian grimaced. “In fact, he described what he’d do in very graphic detail. Then, just like that, he switched to some random, happy topic. I like the guy, but he’s scary.”

“He’s out of line!” I came to a halt outside the party’s room. Through the door, I heard the buzz of conversation. We were apparently among the last to arrive. I guessed that meant I’d be making a grand entrance fitting for the guest of honor. “He has no right to threaten my boyfriends. I’m eighteen. An adult. I don’t need his help. I can threaten my boyfriends myself.”

My indignation amused Adrian, and he gave me a lazy smile. “I agree with you. But that doesn’t mean I’m not going to take his ‘advice’ seriously. My face is too pretty to risk.”

His face *was* pretty, but that didn’t stop me from shaking my head in exasperation. I reached for the door’s handle, but Adrian pulled me back.

“Wait,” he said.

He drew me into his arms again, our lips meeting in another hot kiss. My body pressed to his, and I found myself confused by my own feelings and the realization that I was reaching a point where I might want more than just kissing.

“Okay,” said Adrian when we’d finally broken away. “*Now* we can go in.”

He had that same light tone to his voice, but in his dark green eyes, I saw the kindling of passion. I wasn’t the only one considering more than just kissing. So far, we’d avoided discussing sex, and he’d actually been very good about not pressuring me. I think he knew I just wasn’t ready after Dimitri, but in moments like these, I could see just how difficult it was for Adrian to hold back.

It softened something inside of me, and standing on my tiptoes, I gave him another kiss. “What was that?” he asked a few moments later.

I grinned. “*Your* reward.”

When we finally made it into the party, everyone in the room greeted me with cheers and proud smiles. A long time ago, I’d thrived on being the center of attention. That desire had faded a little, but now, I put on a confident face and accepted my loved ones’ praise with swagger and happiness. I held up my hands triumphantly, earning more clapping and approval.

My party was almost as much of a blur as my trials. You never really realize

how many people care about you until they all turn out to support you. It made me feel humble and *almost* a little teary. I kept that to myself, though. I could hardly start crying at my own victory party.

Everyone wanted to talk to me, and I was surprised and delighted each time some new person approached me. It wasn't often that I had all the people I loved best in one place, and, uneasily I realized this opportunity might never come again.

"Well, you've finally got a license to kill. It's about time."

I turned and met the amused eyes of Christian Ozera, a onetime annoyance who'd become a good friend. So good, in fact, that in my joyous zeal, I reached out and hugged him—something he clearly didn't expect. I was surprising everyone today.

"Whoa, whoa," he said backing up, flushing. "It figures. You're the only girl who'd get all emotional about the thought of killing. I don't even want to think about what goes on when you and Ivashkov are alone."

"Hey, look who's talking. You're itching to get out there yourself."

Christian shrugged by way of agreement. It was a standard rule in our world: Guardians protected Moroi. Moroi didn't get involved in battles. Yet after recent Strigoi attacks, a lot of Moroi—though hardly a majority—had begun to argue that it was time for Moroi to step up and start helping the guardians. Fire users like Christian were particularly valuable since burning was one of the best ways to kill a Strigoi (along with staking and decapitation). The movement to teach Moroi to fight was currently—and purposely—stalled in the Moroi government, but that hadn't stopped some Moroi from practicing in secret. Christian was one of them. Glancing beside him, I blinked in astonishment. There was someone with him, someone I'd hardly noticed.

Jill Mastrano hovered near him like a shadow. A Moroi freshman—well, soon to be a sophomore—Jill had come forward as someone who also wanted to fight. She had sort of become Christian's student.

"Hey Jill," I said, giving her a warm smile. "Thanks for coming."

Jill flushed. She was determined to learn to defend herself, but she grew flustered among others—particularly around "celebrities" like me. Rambling was her nervous reaction. "I had to," she said, brushing her long, light brown hair out of her face. Like always, it was a tangle of curls. "I mean, it's so cool what you did. At the trials. Everyone was amazed. I heard one of the guardians saying that they'd never seen anything like you, so when Christian asked if I wanted to come, *of course* I had to. Oh!" Her light green eyes went wide. "I didn't even tell you congratulations. Sorry. Congratulations."

Beside her, Christian struggled to keep a straight face. I made no such attempts and laughingly gave her a hug too. I was in serious danger of turning warm and fuzzy. I'd probably get my tough guardian status revoked if I kept this up. "Thanks. Are you two ready to take on a Strigoi army yet?"

"Soon," said Christian. "But we might need your backup." He knew as well as I did that Strigoi were way out of their league. His fire magic had helped me a lot, but on his own? That'd be a different story. He and Jill were teaching themselves to use magic offensively, and when I'd had time between classes, I'd taught them a few combat moves.

Jill's face fell a little. "It's going to stop once Christian's gone."

I turned to him. It was no surprise he'd be leaving. We'd *all* be leaving. "What are you going to do with yourself?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Go to Court with the rest of you. Aunt Tasha says we're going to have a 'talk' about my future." He grimaced. Whatever his plans were, it looked like they weren't the same as Tasha's. Most royal Moroi would head off to elite colleges. I wasn't sure what Christian had in mind.

It was standard practice after graduation for new guardians to go to the Moroi Royal Court for orientation and to get their assignments. We were all due to leave in a couple of days. Following Christian's gaze, I saw his aunt across the room, and so help me, she was talking to Abe.

Tasha Ozera was in her late twenties, with the same glossy black hair and ice blue eyes that Christian had. Her beautiful face was marred, however, by some terrible scarring on one side—the result of injuries inflicted by Christian's own parents. Dimitri had been turned into a Strigoi against his will, but the Ozeras had purposely chosen to turn for the sake of immortality. It had ironically cost them their lives when the guardians hunted them down. Tasha had raised Christian (when he wasn't at school) and was one of the main leaders in the movement supporting those Moroi who wanted to fight Strigoi.

Scar or not, I admired her and still thought she was beautiful. From my wayward father's attitude, it was clear he did too. He poured her a glass of champagne and said something that made her laugh. She leaned forward, like she was telling him a secret, and he laughed in return. My jaw dropped. Even from this far away, it was obvious they were flirting.

"Dear God," I said with a shudder, hastily turning back to Christian and Jill.

Christian seemed torn between smugness at my discomfort and his own unease at watching a woman he regarded as a mother get hit upon by a pirate mobster guy. A moment later, Christian's expression softened as he turned back to Jill and continued our conversation.

"Hey, you don't need me," he said. "You'll find others around here. You'll have your own superhero club before you know it."

I found myself smiling again, but my kindly feelings were suddenly shattered by a jolt of jealousy. It wasn't my own, though. It was Lissa's, coming through the bond. Startled, I glanced around and spotted her across the room, giving Christian the look of death as he spoke to Jill.

It's worth mentioning that Christian and Lissa used to date. More than date. They'd been deeply in love, and honestly, they kind of still were. Unfortunately, recent events had badly strained their relationship, and Christian had broken up with her. He'd loved her but had lost his trust in her. Lissa had spun out of control when another spirit user named Avery Lazar had sought to control her. We'd eventually stopped Avery, and she was currently locked away in a mental institution, last I'd heard. Christian now knew the reasons for Lissa's horrible behavior, but the damage was done. Lissa had initially been depressed, but her sorrow had now turned to anger.

She claimed she wanted nothing to do with him anymore, but the bond gave her away. She was always jealous of any girl he talked to—particularly Jill, whom he'd been spending a lot of time with lately. I knew for a fact there was nothing romantic going on there. Jill idolized him as some wise teacher,

nothing more. If she had a crush on anyone, it was Adrian, who always treated her like a kid sister. We all kind of did, really.

Christian followed my gaze, and his expression hardened. Realizing she had his attention, Lissa immediately turned away and began talking to the first guy she found, a good-looking dhampir from my class. She turned on the flirtatious charm that came so easily to spirit users, and soon, both of them were laughing and chatting in a way similar to Abe and Tasha. My party had turned into a round of speed dating.

Christian turned back to me. "Well, looks like she's got plenty to keep her busy."

I rolled my eyes. Lissa wasn't the only one who was jealous. Just as she grew angry whenever he hung out with other girls, Christian became prickly when she spoke to other guys. It was infuriating. Rather than admit they still had feelings and just needed to patch things up, those two idiots just kept displaying more and more hostility toward each other.

"Will you stop already and actually try to talk to her like a rational person someday?" I groaned.

"Sure," he said bitterly. "The day *she* starts acting like a rational person."

"Oh my God. You guys are going to make me rip my hair out."

"It'd be a waste of nice hair," said Christian. "Besides, she's made her attitude perfectly clear."

I started to protest and tell him how stupid he was, but he had no intention of sticking around to hear a lecture I'd already given a dozen times.

"Come on, Jill," he said. "Rose needs to mingle more."

He quickly stepped away, and I had half a mind to go beat some sense into him when a new voice spoke.

"When are you going to fix that?" Tasha was standing next to me, shaking her head at Christian's retreat. "Those two need to be back together."

"I know that. You know that. But they can't seem to get it through their heads."

"Well, you'd better get on it," she said. "If Christian goes to college across the country, it'll be too late." There was a dry—and exasperated—note in her voice when she mentioned Christian going to college.

Lissa was going to Lehigh, a university near the Court, per an arrangement with Tatiana. Lissa would get to attend a bigger university than Moroi usually went to, in exchange for spending time at the Court and learning the royal trade.

"I know," I said in exasperation. "But why am *I* the one who has to fix it?"

Tasha grinned. "Because you're the only one forceful enough to make them see reason."

I decided to let Tasha's insolence go, mostly because her talking to me meant that she wasn't talking to Abe. Glancing across the room, I suddenly stiffened. He was now talking to *my mother*. Snatches of their conversation came to me through the noise.

"Janine," he said winningly, "you haven't aged a day. You could be Rose's sister. Do you remember that night in Cappadocia?"

My mother actually giggled. I had never heard her do that before. I decided I never wanted to again. "Of course. And I remember how eager you were to

help me when my dress strap broke."

"Dear God," I said. "He's unstoppable."

Tasha looked puzzled until she saw what I was talking about. "Abe? He's actually pretty charming."

I groaned. "Excuse me."

I headed toward my parents. I accepted that they'd once had a romance—one that led to my conception—but that didn't mean I wanted to watch them relive it. They were recounting some walk on the beach when I reached them. I promptly tugged Abe's arm away. He was standing way too close to her.

"Hey, can I talk to you?" I asked.

He looked surprised but shrugged. "Certainly." He gave my mother a knowing smile. "We'll talk more later."

"Is no woman safe around here?" I demanded as I led him away.

"What are you talking about?"

We came to a stop by the punch bowl. "You're flirting with every woman in this room!"

My chastising didn't faze him. "Well, there are so many lovely women here. . . . Is that what you wanted to talk to me about?"

"No! I wanted to talk to you about threatening my boyfriend. You had no right to do that."

His dark eyebrows shot up. "What, that? That was nothing. Just a father looking out for his daughter."

"Most fathers don't threaten to disembowel their daughters' boyfriends."

"That's not true. And anyway, that's not what I actually said. It was much worse."

I sighed. He seemed to delight in my exasperation.

"Think of it as a graduation gift. I'm proud of you. Everyone knew you'd be good, but no one knew you'd be *that* good." He winked. "They certainly didn't expect you to destroy their property."

"What property?"

"The bridge."

I frowned. "I had to. It was the most efficient way. God, that was a bitch of a challenge. What'd the other grads do? They didn't actually fight in the middle of that thing, did they?"

Abe shook his head, loving every minute of his superior knowledge. "No one else was put in that situation."

"Of course they were. We all face the same tests."

"Not you. While planning the trials, the guardians decided you needed something . . . extra. Something special. After all, you'd been out fighting in the real world."

"What?" The volume of my voice caught the attention of a few others. I lowered it, and Meredith's earlier words came back to me. "That's not fair!"

He didn't seem concerned. "You're superior to the others. Making you do easy things wouldn't have been fair."

I'd faced a lot of ridiculous things in my life, but this was pretty out there. "So they had me do that crazy bridge stunt instead? And if they were surprised I cut it, then what the hell else did they expect me to do? How else was I supposed to survive that?"

"Hmm." He stroked his chin absentmindedly. "I honestly don't think they knew."

"Oh, for God's sake. This is unbelievable."

"Why are you so mad? You passed."

"Because they put me in a situation they didn't even know how to get out of." I gave him a suspicious look. "And how do you even know about this? This is all guardian business."

An expression I didn't like at all came over his face. "Ah, well, I was with your mother last night and—"

"Whoa, okay. Just stop," I interrupted. "I do not want to hear what you and my mother were doing last night. I think that'd be worse than the bridge."

He grinned. "Both are in the past, so no need to worry now. Enjoy your success."

"I'll try. Just don't do me any more favors with Adrian, okay? I mean, I'm glad you came to support me, but that's more than enough."

Abe gave me a canny look, reminding me that underneath that swagger he was indeed a shrewd and dangerous man. "You were more than happy to have me do you a favor after your return from Russia."

I grimaced. He had a point, seeing as he *had* managed to get a message into a high-security prison. Even if it hadn't led to anything, he still got points.

"Okay," I admitted. "That was pretty amazing. And I'm grateful. I still don't know how you pulled that off." Suddenly, like a dream you recall a day later, I remembered the thought I'd had just before my trials. I lowered my voice. "You didn't actually go there, did you?"

He snorted. "Of course not. I wouldn't set foot in that place. I simply worked my network."

"Where *is* that place?" I asked, hoping I sounded bland.

He wasn't fooled. "Why do you want to know?"

"Because I'm curious! Convicted criminals always disappear without a trace. I'm a guardian now, and I don't even know anything about our own prison system. Is there just one prison? Are there lots?"

Abe didn't answer right away. He was studying me carefully. In his business, he suspected everyone of ulterior motives. As his daughter, I was probably doubly suspect. It was in the genes.

He must have underestimated my potential for insanity because he said at last, "There's more than one. Victor's in one of the worst. It's called Tarasov."

"Where is it?"

"Right now?" He considered. "In Alaska, I think."

"What do you mean, 'right now'?"

"It moves throughout the year. Right now it's in Alaska. Later, it'll be in Argentina." He gave me a sly smile, apparently wondering how astute I was. "Can you guess why?"

"No, I—wait. Sunlight." It made perfect sense. "Alaska's got almost nonstop daylight this time of year—but nonstop night in the winter."

I think he was prouder of my realization than of my trials. "Any prisoners trying to escape would have a hard time." In full sun, no Moroi fugitive would get very far. "Not that anyone can escape through that level of security anyway." I tried to ignore how foreboding that sounded.

“Seems like they’d put it pretty far north in Alaska then,” I said, hoping to worm out the actual location indirectly. “You get more light that way.”

He chuckled. “Even I can’t tell you that. That’s information the guardians keep close, buried in their headquarters.”

I froze. *Headquarters* . . .

Abe, despite being usually observant, didn’t notice my reaction. His eyes were watching something across the room. “Is that Renee Szelsky? My, my . . . she’s grown lovely over the years.”

I grudgingly waved him away, largely because I wanted to chase this new plan in my mind—and because Renee wasn’t anyone I knew very well, which made him hitting on her less appalling. “Well, don’t let me stop you. Go lure more women into your web.”

Abe didn’t need much prodding. Alone, I let my brain spin, wondering if my developing scheme had any chance of success. His words had sparked a new plan in my mind. It wasn’t much crazier than most of my others. Across the room, I met Lissa’s jade eyes again. With Christian out of sight, her mood had improved. She was enjoying herself and was excited about the adventures ahead of us, now that we were free and out in the world. My mind flashed back to the anxieties I’d felt earlier in the day. We might be free now, but reality would catch up with us soon. The clock was ticking. Dimitri was waiting, watching. I wondered briefly if I’d still get his weekly letters, now that I’d be leaving the school.

I smiled at her, feeling kind of bad that I’d be ruining her mood when I told her we might now have a very real chance of busting out Victor Dashkov.

THREE

THE NEXT COUPLE OF DAYS were strange. The other novices and I might have had the flashiest graduation, but we weren't the only ones finishing our education at St. Vladimir's. The Moroi had their own commencement ceremony, and campus grew packed with visitors. Then, almost as quickly as they came, parents disappeared—taking their sons and daughters with them. Royal Moroi left to spend their summers with their parents at luxury estates—many in the Southern Hemisphere, where the days were shorter this time of year. "Ordinary" Moroi left with their parents too, off to more modest homes, possibly getting summer jobs before college.

And of course, with school wrapping up for the summer, all the other students left too. Some with no family to go home to, usually dhampirs, stayed year-round, taking special electives, but they were the minority. Campus grew emptier each day as my classmates and I waited for the day when we'd be taken to the Royal Court. We made our farewells to others, Moroi moving on or younger dhampirs who'd soon be following in our footsteps.

One person I was sad to part with was Jill. I happened to catch her as I was walking toward Lissa's dorm the day before my Court trip. There was a woman with Jill, presumably her mother, and both were carrying boxes. Jill's face lit up when she saw me.

"Hey Rose! I said goodbye to everyone else but couldn't find you," she said excitedly.

I smiled. "Well, I'm glad you caught me."

I couldn't tell her that I'd been saying goodbye too. I'd spent my last day at St. Vladimir's walking all the familiar sites, starting with the elementary campus where Lissa and I had first met in kindergarten. I'd explored the halls and corners of my dorms, walked past favorite classrooms, and even visited the chapel. I'd also passed a lot of time in areas filled with bittersweet memories, like the training areas where I'd first gotten to know Dimitri. The track where he used to make me run laps. The cabin where we'd finally given in to each other. It had been one of the most amazing nights of my life, and thinking about it always brought me both joy and pain.

Jill didn't need to be burdened with any of that, though. I turned toward her mother and started to offer my hand until I realized she couldn't shake it while maneuvering the box. "I'm Rose Hathaway. Here, let me carry that."

I took it before she could protest because I was certain she would. "Thank you," she said, pleasantly surprised. I fell in step with them as they began walking again. "I'm Emily Mastrano. Jill's told me a lot about you."

"Oh yeah?" I asked, giving Jill a teasing smile.

"Not that much. Just how I hang out with you sometimes." There was a slight warning in Jill's green eyes, and it occurred to me that Emily probably didn't know her daughter practiced forbidden forms of Strigoi-killing magic in

her free time.

"We like having Jill around," I said, not blowing her cover. "And one of these days, we're going to teach her to tame that hair."

Emily laughed. "I've been trying for almost fifteen years. Good luck."

Jill's mother was stunning. The two didn't resemble each other much, at least not superficially. Emily's lustrous hair was straight and black, her eyes deep blue and long-lashed. She moved with a willowy grace, very different from Jill's always self-conscious walk. Yet, I could see the shared genes here and there, the heart-shaped faces and lip shapes. Jill was still young, and as she grew into her features, she'd likely be a heartbreaker herself someday—something she was probably oblivious to right now. Hopefully her self-confidence would grow.

"Where's home for you guys?" I asked.

"Detroit," said Jill, making a face.

"It's not that bad," laughed her mom.

"There are no mountains. Just highways."

"I'm part of a ballet company there," Emily explained. "So we stay where we can pay the bills." I think I was more surprised that people went to the ballet in Detroit than that Emily was a ballerina. It made sense, watching her, and really, with their tall and slim builds, Moroi were ideal dancers as far as humans were concerned.

"Hey, it's a big city," I told Jill. "Enjoy the excitement while you can before you come back to the boring middle of nowhere." Of course, illicit combat training and Strigoi attacks were hardly boring, but I wanted to make Jill feel better. "And it won't be that long." Moroi summer vacations were barely two months. Parents were eager to return their children to the safety of the Academy.

"I guess," said Jill, not sounding convinced. We reached their car, and I loaded the boxes into the trunk.

"I'll e-mail you when I can," I promised. "And I bet Christian will too. Maybe I can even talk Adrian into it."

Jill brightened, and I was happy to see her return to her normal overexcited self. "Really? That would be great. I want to hear everything that goes on at Court. You'll probably get to do all sorts of cool things with Lissa and Adrian, and I bet Christian will find out all sorts of things . . . about things."

Emily didn't seem to notice Jill's lame editing attempt and instead fixed me with a pretty smile. "Thanks for your help, Rose. It was great to meet you."

"You too—umph!"

Jill had thrown herself into me with a hug. "Good luck with everything," she said. "You're so lucky—you're going to have such a great life now!"

I returned the hug, unable to explain how jealous of her I was. Her life was still safe and innocent. She might resent spending a summer in Detroit, but the stay would be brief, and soon she'd be back in the familiar and easy world of St. Vladimir's. She wouldn't be setting out into the unknown and its dangers.

It was only after she and her mother had driven off that I could bring myself to respond to her comment. "I hope so," I murmured, thinking about what was to come. "I hope so."

My classmates and select Moroi flew out early the next day, leaving the rocky mountains of Montana behind for the rolling hills of Pennsylvania. The Royal Court was a lot like I remembered, with the same imposing, ancient feel that St. Vladimir's tried to impart with its towering buildings and intricate stone architecture. But the school also seemed to want to show off a wise, studious air, whereas the Court was more ostentatious. It was like the buildings themselves tried to make sure we all knew that this was the seat of power and royalty among the Moroi. The Royal Court wanted us to be amazed and maybe a little cowed.

And even though I'd been here before, I was still impressed. The doors and windows of the tan stone buildings were embossed and framed in pristine golden decorations. They were a far cry from the brightness I'd seen in Russia, but I realized now that the Court's designers had modeled these buildings off the old European ones—the fortresses and palaces of Saint Petersburg. St. Vladimir's had benches and paths in the quads and courtyards, but the Court went a step further. Fountains and elaborate statues of past rulers adorned the lawns, exquisite marble works that had previously been hidden in snow. Now, in the full throes of summer, they were bright and on display. And everywhere, everywhere were flowers on trees, bushes, paths—it was dazzling.

It made sense that new grads would visit the guardians' central administration, but it occurred to me that there was another reason they brought new guardians here in the summer. They wanted my classmates and me to see all of this, to be overwhelmed and appreciative of the glory for which we were fighting. Looking at the faces of the new graduates, I knew the tactic was working. Most had never been here before.

Lissa and Adrian had been on my flight, and the three of us clustered together as we walked with the group. It was as warm as it had been in Montana, but the humidity here was much thicker. I was sweating after only a little light walking.

"You *did* bring a dress this time, right?" asked Adrian.

"Of course," I said. "They've got some fancy things they want us to go to, aside from the main reception. Although, they might give me my black-and-white for that."

He shook his head, and I noticed his hand start to move toward his pocket before hesitating and pulling back. He might have been making progress in quitting smoking, but I was pretty sure the subconscious urge to automatically reach for a pack when outdoors was hard to get rid of so quickly.

"I mean for tonight. For dinner."

I glanced questioningly at Lissa. Her schedule at Court always had assorted functions thrown into it that "average people" didn't attend. With my new and uncertain status, I wasn't sure if I'd be going with her. I sensed her puzzlement through the bond and could tell that she didn't have a clue about any special dinner plans.

"What dinner?" I asked.

"The one I set up with my family."

"The one you—" I came to an abrupt halt and stared wide-eyed, not liking

the smirk on his face one bit. “Adrian!” A few of the new grads gave me curious looks and continued walking around us.

“Come on, we’ve been going out a couple months. Meeting parents is part of the dating ritual. I’ve met your mom. I even met your scary-ass dad. Now it’s your turn. I guarantee none of my family’s gonna make the kind of suggestions your dad did.”

I’d actually kind of met Adrian’s dad before. Or, well, I’d seen him at a party. I doubted he had any idea who I was—my crazy reputation aside. I knew almost nothing about Adrian’s mother. He actually spoke very little about his family members—well, most of them.

“*Just* your parents?” I asked warily. “Any other family I should know about?”

“Well . . .” Adrian’s hand twitched again. I think this time he wanted a cigarette as some sort of protection from the warning note in my voice. Lissa, I observed, seemed highly amused by all of this. “My favorite great-aunt might stop by.”

“Tatiana?” I exclaimed. For the hundredth time, I wondered how I had lucked out with a guy related to the leader of the entire Moroi world. “She hates me! You know what happened the last time we talked.” Her Royal Majesty had laid into me, yelling about how I was too trashy to hook up with her nephew and how she had great “plans” for him and Lissa.

“I think she’s come around.”

“Oh, come *on*.”

“No, really.” He almost looked like he was telling the truth. “I talked to my mom the other day, and . . . I don’t know. Aunt Tatiana doesn’t seem to hate you as much.”

I frowned, and the three of us began to walk again. “Maybe she admires your recent vigilante work,” mused Lissa.

“Maybe,” I said. But I didn’t really believe it. If anything, me going rogue should have made me more despicable in the queen’s eyes.

I felt kind of betrayed that Adrian had sprung this dinner on me, but there was nothing to be done about it now. The only bright side was that I had the impression he was teasing me about his aunt stopping by. I told him I’d go, and my decision put him in a good enough mood that he didn’t ask too many questions when Lissa and I said we were going to do “our own thing” that afternoon. My classmates were all getting a tour of the Court and its grounds as part of their indoctrination, but I’d seen it all before and was able to wiggle out of it. Lissa and I dropped our belongings off in our rooms and then set out to the far side of the Court, where the not-so-royal people lived.

“Are you going to tell me yet what this *other* part of your plan is?” asked Lissa.

Ever since Abe had explained about Victor’s prison, I’d been making another mental list of the problems we’d have breaking into it. Mainly, there were two, which was one less than I’d initially had since talking to Abe. Not that things were really much easier. First, we had no clue *where* in Alaska this place was. Second, we didn’t know what the prison’s defenses and layout were like. We had no idea what we had to bust through.

Yet, something told me all of these answers could be found in one source,

which meant I really only had one immediate problem: how to reach that source. Fortunately, I knew someone who might be able to help get us there.

"We're going to see Mia," I told her.

Mia Rinaldi was a former Moroi classmate of ours—a former enemy, actually. She was also the poster child for total personality makeovers. She'd gone from a scheming bitch who was willing to crush—and sleep with—anyone in her quest for popularity to a down-to-earth, confident girl eager to learn to defend herself and others from Strigoi. She lived here at Court with her father.

"You think Mia knows how to break into a prison?"

"Mia's good, but I don't think she's that good. She can probably help us get intel, though."

Lissa groaned. "I can't believe you just used the word *intel*. This really is turning into a spy movie." She spoke flippantly, but I could feel the worry within her. The light tone was masking her fear, the unease she still felt about freeing Victor, despite her promise to me.

Those non-royals who worked and did ordinary things at Court lived in apartments far from the queen's quarters and receiving hall. I'd gotten Mia's address in advance, and we set out across the perfectly manicured grounds, grumbling to each other along the way about the hot day. We found her at home, casually dressed in jeans and a T-shirt with a Popsicle in her hand. Her eyes widened when she saw us outside her door.

"Well, I'll be damned," she said.

I laughed. It was the kind of response I'd give. "Nice to see you too. Can we come in?"

"Of course." She stepped aside. "You want a Popsicle?"

Did I ever. I took a grape one and sat with her and Lissa in the small living room. The place was a far cry from the opulence of royal guest housing, but it was cozy and clean and undoubtedly well loved by Mia and her father.

"I knew the grads were coming," Mia said, brushing blond curls out of her face. "But I wasn't sure if you were with them or not. Did you even graduate?"

"I did," I said. "Got the promise mark and everything." I lifted my hair so she could see the bandage.

"I'm surprised they let you back in after you took off on your killing spree. Or did you get extra credit for that?"

Apparently, Mia had heard the same tall tale about my adventures that everyone else had. That was fine with me. I didn't want to talk about the truth. I didn't want to talk about Dimitri.

"Do you think anyone could stop Rose from doing what she wants?" asked Lissa with a smile. She was trying to keep us from getting into too much detail about my past whereabouts, for which I was grateful.

Mia laughed and crunched on a big chunk of lime ice. It was a wonder she didn't get brain freeze. "True." Her smile faded as she swallowed the bite. Her blue eyes, always shrewd, studied me in silence for a few moments. "And Rose wants something now."

"Hey, we're just happy to see you," I said.

"I believe you. But I also believe you've got an ulterior motive."

Lissa's smile grew. She was amused by me being caught in my spy game.

“What makes you say that? Can you read Rose that well or do you just *always* assume she’s got an ulterior motive?”

Now Mia smiled again. “Both.” She scooted forward on the couch, fixing me with a serious look. When had she grown so perceptive? “Okay. No point in wasting time. What do you need my help with?”

I sighed, busted. “I need to get inside the guardians’ main security office.”

Beside me, Lissa made a sort of strangled noise. I felt kind of bad for her. While she could conceal her thoughts from me on occasion, there wasn’t much she did or said that came as a true surprise. Me? I continually blindsided her. She had no clue what was coming half the time, but honestly, if we were planning on springing a renowned criminal out of prison, then breaking into a security office shouldn’t have been that big of a shock.

“Wow,” said Mia. “You don’t waste time with the little stuff.” Her grin twitched a bit. “Of course, you wouldn’t come to me with little stuff. You could do that yourself.”

“Can you get me—us—in there?” I asked. “You’re friendly with some of the guardians here . . . and your dad has access to a lot of places. . . .” I didn’t know Mr. Rinaldi’s exact job, but I thought it was maintenance-related.

“What are you looking for?” she asked. She held up a hand when I opened my mouth to protest. “No, no. I don’t need details. Just a general idea so I can figure this out. I know you’re not going there just to tour the place.”

“I need some records,” I explained.

Her eyebrows rose. “Personnel? Trying to get yourself a job?”

“I—no.” Huh. That wasn’t a bad idea, considering my precarious position with being assigned to Lissa. But no. One issue at a time. “I need some records about outside security at other places—schools, royal homes, prisons.” I tried to keep my expression casual as I mentioned that last one. Mia was on board with some crazy things, but even she had her limits. “I figured they must keep that stuff there?”

“They do,” she said. “But most of it’s electronic. And no offense, but that might even be beyond your abilities. Even if we could get to one of their computers, everything’s password protected. And if they walk away, they lock the computers. I’m guessing you haven’t become a hacker since the last time I saw you.”

No, certainly not. And unlike the heroes of those spy movies Lissa teased me about, I had no tech-savvy friends who could even come close to breaking that kind of encryption and security. Damn. I stared glumly at my feet, wondering if I had any chance at all of getting more information out of Abe.

“But,” said Mia, “if the information you need isn’t *too* current, they might still have paper copies.”

I jerked my head up. “Where?”

“They’ve got mass storage rooms, tucked away in one of the basements. Files and files. Still under lock and key—but probably easier to get to than fighting the computers. Again, depends on what you need. How old it is.”

Abe had given me the impression that Tarasov Prison had been around for a while. Surely there was a record of it in these archives. I didn’t doubt the guardians had gone digital a while ago, which meant we might not find up-to-the-minute details on the place’s security, but I’d settle for a blueprint.

"It might be what we need. Can you get us in?"

Mia was quiet for several seconds, and I could see her mind whirring. "Possibly." She glanced at Lissa. "Can *you* still compel people into being your slaves?"

Lissa grimaced. "I don't like to think of it like that, but yeah, I can." It was another of spirit's perks.

Mia considered a few moments more and then gave a quick nod. "Okay. Come back around two, and we'll see what we can do."

Two in the afternoon for the rest of the world meant the middle of the night for Moroi, who ran on a nocturnal schedule. Being out in broad daylight didn't feel particularly sneaky, but I had to figure Mia's planning here was based on the fact that there would also be fewer people around that time of day.

I was trying to decide if we should socialize more or head out when a knock interrupted my thoughts. Mia flinched and suddenly looked uncomfortable. She rose to get the door, and a familiar voice drifted down the hall toward us.

"Sorry I'm early, but I—"

Christian stepped into the living room. He abruptly shut up when he saw Lissa and me. Everyone seemed frozen, so it looked like it was up to me to pretend like this wasn't a horribly awkward situation.

"Hey, Christian," I said cheerfully. "How's it going?"

His eyes were on Lissa, and it took him a moment to drag them to me. "Fine." He glanced at Mia. "I can come back. . . . "

Lissa hastily stood up. "No," she said, voice cool and princesslike. "Rose and I have to go anyway."

"Yeah," I agreed, following her lead. "We have . . . stuff . . . to do. And we don't want to interrupt your . . ." Hell, I had no idea what they were going to do. Wasn't sure I wanted to.

Mia had found her voice. "Christian wanted to see some of the moves I've been practicing with the campus guardians."

"Cool." I kept the smile on my face as Lissa and I moved toward the door. She stepped as far around Christian as she could. "Jill will be jealous."

And not just Jill. After another round of goodbyes, Lissa and I left and set back off across the grounds. I could feel the anger and jealousy radiating through her bond.

"It's only their fight club, Liss," I said, having no need for her side of the conversation. "Nothing's going on. They're going to talk punches and kicking and other boring stuff." Well, actually that stuff was pretty sweet, but I wasn't about to glorify Christian and Mia hanging out.

"Maybe *now* nothing's going on," she growled, staring stonily ahead. "But who knows what could happen? They spend time together, practice some physical moves, one thing leads to another—"

"That's ridiculous," I said. "That kind of stuff isn't romantic at all." Another lie, seeing as that was exactly how my relationship with Dimitri had begun. Again, best not to mention that. "Besides, Christian can't be involved with *every* girl he hangs out with. Mia, Jill—no offense, but he's not really that much of a ladies' man."

"He's really good-looking," she argued, those dark feelings still seething within her.

"Yeah," I conceded, keeping my eyes carefully on the pathway. "But it takes more than that. And besides, I thought you didn't care what he did."

"I don't," she agreed, not even convincing herself, let alone me. "Not at all."

My attempts to distract her proved pretty useless for the rest of the day. Tasha's words came back to me: *Why haven't you fixed this?* Because Lissa and Christian were being too damned unreasonable, both caught up in their own pissed-off feelings—which were kind of pissing me off in return. Christian would have been pretty helpful in my illicit escapades, but I had to keep my distance for Lissa's sake.

I finally left her to her bad mood when dinner came around. Compared to her romantic situation, my relationship with a semi-spoiled royal playboy from a disapproving family seemed downright optimistic. What a sad and scary world this was becoming. I assured Lissa I'd head straight back after dinner and that we'd go see Mia together. The mention of Mia didn't make Lissa happy, but the thought of a potential break-in did distract her momentarily from Christian.

The dress I had for dinner was maroon, made of light, gauzy material that was great for summer weather. The neckline was decent, and little cap sleeves gave it a classy edge. With my hair in a low ponytail that did a decent job of hiding the healing tattoo, I almost looked like a respectable girlfriend—which only went to show how deceptive appearances were, seeing as I was part of a crazy scheme to bring my last boyfriend back from the dead.

Adrian surveyed me from head to toe when I arrived at his parents' town house. They kept a permanent residence here at the Court. The small smile on his face told me he liked what he saw.

"You approve?" I asked, spinning around.

He slipped an arm around my waist. "Unfortunately, yes. I was hoping you'd show up in something a lot sluttier. Something that would scandalize my parents."

"Sometimes it's like you don't even care about me as a person," I observed as we walked inside. "It's like you're just using me for shock value."

"It's both, little dhampir. I care about you, *and* I'm using you for shock value."

I hid a smile as the Ivashkovs' housekeeper led us toward the dining room. The Court actually had restaurants and cafés tucked away within its buildings, but royals like Adrian's parents would consider it classier to have a fancy dinner in their home. Me, I would have preferred being out in public. More escape options.

"You must be Rose."

My assessment of the exits was interrupted when a very tall, very elegant Moroi woman came into the room. She wore a long, dark green satin dress that immediately made me feel out of place and that perfectly matched the color of her—and Adrian's—eyes. Her dark hair was pulled into a bun, and she smiled down at me with genuine warmth as she took my hand.

"I'm Daniella Ivashkov," she said. "It's very nice to meet you at last."

Was it really? My hand automatically shook hers in return. "Nice to meet you too, Lady Ivashkov."

"Call me Daniella, please." She turned to Adrian and *tsk*ed as she

straightened the collar of his button-up shirt. “Honestly, darling,” she said. “Do you even look in a mirror before you walk out the door? Your hair’s a mess.”

He dodged her as she reached toward his head. “Are you kidding? I spent hours in front of the mirror to *make* it look this way.”

She gave a tormented sigh. “Some days I can’t decide if I’m lucky or not to have no other children.” Behind her, quiet servants were setting food out on the table. Steam rose up from the platters, and my stomach rumbled. I hoped no one else heard. Daniella glanced off down the hall beyond her. “Nathan, will you hurry up? The food’s getting cold.”

A few moments later, heavy footsteps sounded on the ornate wood floor, and Nathan Ivashkov swept into the room. Like his wife, he was dressed formally, the blue satin of his tie gleaming next to the starkness of his heavy black suit coat. I was glad they had air-conditioning in here, or he’d have been melting in that heavy fabric. The feature on him that stood out the most was what I remembered from before: a distinctly silver head of hair and mustache. I wondered if Adrian’s hair would look like that when he was older. Nah, I’d never find out. Adrian would probably dye his hair at the first sign of gray—or silver.

Adrian’s father might be exactly as I remembered, but it was clear he had no clue who I was. In fact, he seemed genuinely startled to see me.

“This is Adrian’s, ah, friend, Rose Hathaway,” said Daniella gently. “You remember—he said he’d bring her tonight.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Lord Ivashkov.”

Unlike his wife, he didn’t offer to put us on a first-name basis, which relieved me a little. The Strigoi who had forcefully turned Dimitri had been named Nathan too, and it wasn’t a name I wanted to speak aloud. Adrian’s father looked me over, but it wasn’t with the appreciation Adrian had shown earlier. It was more like I was an oddity. “Oh. The dhampir girl.”

He wasn’t rude exactly, just disinterested. I mean, it wasn’t like he called me a blood whore or anything. We all sat down to eat, and although Adrian kept his typical devil-may-care smile on his face, I again got the vibe that he really, *really* wanted a cigarette. Probably hard liquor, too. Being around his parents was not something he enjoyed. When one of the servants poured us all wine, Adrian looked immensely relieved and didn’t hold back. I shot him a cautioning look that he ignored.

Nathan managed to rapidly devour his balsamic-glazed pork medallions while still looking elegant and proper. “So,” he said, attention focused on Adrian, “now that Vasilisa’s graduated, what are you going to do with yourself? You aren’t going to keep slumming with high school students, are you? There’s no point in you being there anymore.”

“I don’t know,” said Adrian lazily. He shook his head, further tousling his carefully mussed hair. “I kind of like hanging out with them. They think I’m funnier than I really am.”

“Unsurprising,” his father replied. “You aren’t funny at all. It’s time you do something productive. If you aren’t going to go back to college, you should at least start sitting in on some of the family business meetings. Tatiana spoils you, but you could learn a lot from Rufus.”

I knew enough about royal politics to recognize the name. The oldest member of each family was usually its "prince" or "princess" and held a Royal Council position—and was eligible to become king or queen. When Tatiana had taken the crown, Rufus had become prince of the Ivashkov family since he was the next oldest.

"True," said Adrian deadpan. He wasn't eating so much as pushing his food around. "I'd really like to know how he keeps his two mistresses a secret from his wife."

"Adrian!" snapped Daniella, a flush spilling over her pale cheeks. "Don't say things like that at our dinner table—and certainly not in front of a guest."

Nathan seemed to notice me again and gave a dismissive shrug. "She doesn't matter." I bit my lip on that, repressing the urge to see if I could throw my china plate Frisbee style and hit him in the head. I decided against it. Not only would it ruin dinner, but the plate probably wouldn't get the lift I needed. Nathan turned his scowl back to Adrian. "But *you* do. I'm not going to have you sitting around doing nothing—and using our money to fund it."

Something told me I should stay out of this, but I couldn't stand to see Adrian dressed down by his annoying father. Adrian *did* sit around and waste money, but Nathan didn't have the right to make fun of him for it. I mean, sure, I did all the time. But that was different.

"Maybe you could go to Lehigh with Lissa," I offered. "Keep studying spirit with her and then . . . do whatever else you were doing the last time you were in college. . . ."

"Drinking and skipping classes," said Nathan.

"Art," said Daniella. "Adrian took art classes."

"Really?" I asked, turning to him in surprise. Somehow, I could imagine him as an artistic type. It fit his erratic personality. "Then this would be perfect. You could pick it up again."

He shrugged and finished his second glass of wine. "I don't know. This college would probably have the same problem the last one did."

I frowned. "What's that?"

"Homework."

"Adrian," growled his father.

"It's okay," said Adrian breezily. He rested his arm casually on the table. "I don't really need a job or extra money. After Rose and I get married, the kids and I'll just live off of her guardian paycheck."

We all froze, even me. I knew perfectly well that he was joking. I mean, even if he harbored fantasies of marriage and kids (and I was *pretty* sure he didn't), the meager salary a guardian made would *never* be enough to keep him in the luxurious life he required.

Adrian's father, however, clearly did *not* think he was joking. Daniella seemed undecided. Me, I was just uncomfortable. It was a very, very bad topic to bring up at a dinner like this, and I couldn't believe Adrian had gone there. I didn't even think the wine was to blame. Adrian just liked tormenting his father that much.

The awful silence grew thicker and thicker. My gut instinct to fill conversation voids was raging, but something told me to stay quiet. The tension increased. When the doorbell rang, all four of us nearly jumped out of

our chairs.

The housekeeper, Torrie, scurried off to answer it, and I breathed a mental sigh of relief. An unexpected visitor would help ease the tension.

Or maybe not.

Torrie cleared her throat when she returned, clearly flustered as she looked from Daniella to Nathan. “Her Royal Majesty Queen Tatiana is here.”

No. Way.

All three Ivashkovs stood up abruptly, and a half second later, I joined them. I hadn’t believed Adrian earlier when he said Tatiana might come. From his face, he seemed pretty surprised now too. But sure enough, there she was. She swept into the room, elegant in what must have been business casual for her: tailored black slacks and jacket with a red silk and lace blouse underneath. Little jeweled barrettes gleamed in her dark hair, and those imperious eyes peered down at us all as we offered hasty bows. Even her own family followed formalities.

“Aunt Tatiana,” said Nathan, forcing what looked like a smile onto his face. I don’t think he did it very often. “Won’t you join us for dinner?”

She waved a hand dismissively. “No, no. I can’t stay. I’m on my way to meet with Priscilla but thought I’d stop by when I heard Adrian had returned.” Her gaze fell on him. “I can’t believe you’ve been here all day and didn’t come visit.” Her voice was cool, but I swear there was an amused twinkle in her eyes. It was scary. She wasn’t someone I thought of as warm and fuzzy. The whole experience of seeing her outside of one of her ceremonial rooms was totally unreal.

Adrian grinned at her. He was clearly the most comfortable person in the room right now. For reasons I never understood, Tatiana loved and spoiled Adrian. That wasn’t to say that she didn’t love her other family members; it was just clear that he was her favorite. It had always surprised me, considering what a scoundrel he was sometimes.

“Aw, I figured you had more important things to do than see me,” he told her. “Besides, I quit smoking, so now we won’t be able to go sneak cigarettes out behind the throne room together.”

“Adrian!” chastised Nathan, turning bright red. It occurred to me then that I could have based a drinking game around how many times he exclaimed his son’s name disapprovingly. “Auntie, I’m sor—”

Tatiana held up a hand again. “Oh, be silent, Nathan. No one wants to hear it.” I almost choked. Being in the same room with the queen was horrid, but it was almost worth it to see her verbally bitch-slap Lord Ivashkov. She turned back to Adrian, face thawing. “You’ve finally quit? It’s about time. I suppose this is your doing?”

It took me a moment to realize she was speaking to me. Until that point, I’d kind of hoped she might not have even noticed me. It seemed the only explanation for her not screaming at them to remove the rebellious little blood whore. It was shocking. Her voice wasn’t accusatory, either. It was . . . impressed.

“W-well, it wasn’t me, Your Majesty,” I said. My meekness was a far cry from my behavior at our last meeting. “Adrian was the one who had the, uh, determination to do it.”

So help me, Tatiana chuckled. “Very diplomatic. They should assign you to a politician.”

Nathan didn’t like the attention on me. I wasn’t sure I did either, semi-pleasant or not. “Are you and Priscilla doing business tonight? Or just having a friendly dinner?”

Tatiana dragged her gaze from me. “Both. There’s been some inter-family squabbling going on. Not publicly, but it’s getting out. People are making noise about security. Some are ready to start training up right now. Others are wondering if guardians can go without sleep.” She rolled her eyes. “And those are the tamest of the suggestions.”

No question about it. This visit had gotten a lot more interesting.

“I hope you’re going to shut those would-be militants up,” growled Nathan. “Us fighting alongside guardians is absurd.”

“What’s *absurd*,” said Tatiana, “is having strife among the royal classes. That’s what I want to ‘shut up.’” Her tone grew lofty, very queenlike. “We’re the leaders among the Moroi. We have to set an example. We need to be unified to survive.”

I studied her curiously. What did that mean? She hadn’t agreed or disagreed with Nathan’s stance on Moroi fighting. She’d only mentioned establishing peace among her people. But how? Was her method to encourage the new motion or squash it? Security was a huge concern for everyone after the attack, and it fell on her to figure it out.

“Sounds pretty hard to me,” said Adrian, playing oblivious to the seriousness of the matter. “If you still want a cigarette afterward, I’ll make an exception.”

“I’ll settle for you coming to make a proper visit tomorrow,” she said dryly. “Leave the cigarettes at home.” She glanced at his empty wineglass. “And other things.” A flash of steely resolve crossed her gaze, and even though it melted as quickly as it had come, I felt almost relieved. There was the icy Tatiana I knew.

He saluted. “Noted.”

Tatiana gave the rest of us brief glances. “Have a good evening,” was her only farewell. We bowed again, and then she headed back toward the front door. As she did, I heard scuffling and murmured voices. She’d been traveling with a retinue, I realized, and had left them all in the foyer while she came to say hello to Adrian.

Dinner was quiet after that. Tatiana’s visit had kind of left us all astonished. At least it meant I didn’t have to hear Adrian and his father bicker anymore. Daniella mostly maintained what little conversation there was, attempting to inquire about my interests, and I realized she hadn’t said a word during Tatiana’s brief visit. Daniella had married into the Ivashkovs, and I wondered if she found the queen intimidating.

When the time came for us to leave, Daniella was all smiles while Nathan retired to his study.

“You need to come by more often,” she told Adrian, smoothing his hair in spite of his protests. “And you’re welcome anytime, Rose.”

“Thank you,” I said, dumbfounded. I kept studying her face to see if she was lying, but I didn’t think she was. It made no sense. Moroi didn’t approve of

long-term relationships with dhampirs. Royal Moroi especially didn't. And royal Moroi related to the queen *especially* didn't, at least if past experience was any indication.

Adrian sighed. "Maybe if he's not around. Oh, damn. That reminds me. I left my coat here last time—I wanted to get out too fast."

"You've got, like, fifty coats," I remarked.

"Ask Torrie," said Daniella. "She'll know where it is."

Adrian went off to find the housekeeper, leaving me with his mother. I should have made polite, inconsequential small talk, but my curiosity was getting the better of me.

"Dinner was really great," I told her honestly. "And I hope you won't take this the wrong way . . . but I mean . . . well, you seem okay with Adrian and me dating."

She nodded serenely. "I am."

"And . . ." Well, it had to be said. "Tat—Queen Tatiana kind of seemed okay with it too."

"She is."

I made sure my jaw didn't drop to the floor. "But . . . I mean, the last time I talked to her, she was really mad. She kept telling me over and over how she'd never allow us to be together in the future or get married or anything like that." I cringed, recalling Adrian's joke. "I figured you'd feel the same. Lord Ivashkov does. You can't really want your son to be with a dhampir forever."

Daniella's smile was kind but wry. "Do *you* plan on being with him forever? Do *you* plan on marrying him and settling down?"

The question totally caught me off guard. "I . . . no . . . I mean, no offense to Adrian. I just never—"

"Planned on settling down at all?" She nodded wisely. "That's what I thought. Believe me, I know Adrian wasn't serious earlier. Everyone's jumping to conclusions that haven't even happened. I've heard of you, Rose—everyone has. And I admire you. And based on what I've learned, I'm guessing you aren't the type who would quit being a guardian to be a housewife."

"You're right," I admitted.

"Then I don't see the problem. You're both young. You're entitled to have fun and do what you want now, but I—you and I—know that even if you see Adrian off and on for the rest of your life, you aren't going to get married or settle down. And it has nothing to do with what Nathan or anyone says. It's the way of the world. It's the kind of person you are. I can see it in your eyes. Tatiana's realized it too, and that's why she eased up. You need to be out there fighting, and that's what you'll do. At least if you truly intend to be a guardian."

"I do." I was staring at her in wonder. Her attitude was amazing. She was the first royal I'd met who hadn't immediately freaked out and gone crazy over the idea of a Moroi and dhampir match. If other people shared her view, it would make a lot of others' lives easier. And she was right. It didn't matter what Nathan thought. It wouldn't have even mattered if Dimitri had been around. The bottom line was that Adrian and I wouldn't be together for the rest of our lives because I'd always be on guardian duty, not lounging around like he did. Realizing that freed things up . . . yet it made me a little sad too.

Behind her, I could see Adrian approaching down the hall. Daniella leaned forward, pitching her voice low for me. There was a wistful note to her words when she spoke, the tone of a concerned mother. “But Rose? While I’m fine with you two dating and being happy, please try not to break his heart *too* much when the time comes.”

FOUR

I DECIDED IT'D BE BEST not to mention my conversation with Adrian's mother to him. I didn't need psychic powers to sense his mixed mood as we walked back to guest housing. His father had annoyed him, but his mother's seeming acceptance had cheered him up. I didn't want to damage that by letting Adrian know she was only okay with our dating because she figured it was a temporary, fun thing.

"So you're going off with Lissa?" he asked when we reached my room.

"Yup, sorry. You know—girl stuff." And by girl stuff, I meant breaking and entering.

Adrian seemed a little disappointed, but I knew he didn't begrudge our friendship. He gave me a small smile and wrapped his arms around my waist, leaning down to kiss me. Our lips met, and that warmth that always surprised me spread through me. After a few sweet moments, we broke apart, but the look in his eyes said it wasn't easy for him.

"See you later," I said. He gave me one more quick kiss and then headed off to his own room.

I immediately sought out Lissa, who was hanging out in her own room. She was staring intently at a silver spoon, and through our bond, I could sense her intent. She was attempting to infuse it with spirit's compulsion, so that whoever held it would cheer up. I wondered if she intended it for herself or was just randomly experimenting. I didn't probe her mind to find out.

"A spoon?" I asked with amusement.

She shrugged and set it down. "Hey, it's not easy to keep getting a hold of silver. I have to take what I can get."

"Well, it'd make for happy dinner parties."

She smiled and put her feet upon the ebony coffee table that sat in the middle of her little suite's living room. Each time I saw it, I couldn't help but be reminded of the glossy black furniture that had been in my own prison suite back in Russia. I had fought Dimitri with a stake made from a chair's leg of similar style.

"Speaking of which . . . how was *your* dinner party?"

"Not as bad as I thought," I admitted. "I never realized what an asshole Adrian's dad was, though. His mom was actually pretty cool. She didn't have a problem with us dating."

"Yeah, I've met her. She is nice . . . though I never thought she was nice enough to be okay with scandalous dating. I don't suppose Her Royal Majesty showed up?" Lissa was joking, so my response floored her.

"She did, and . . . it wasn't awful."

"What? Did you say 'wasn't'?"

"I know, I know. It was so crazy. It was this really quick visit to see Adrian, and she acted like me being there was no big deal." I didn't bother delving

into the politics of Tatiana's views on Moroi training for battle. "Of course, who knows what would have happened if she stayed? Maybe she would have turned into her old self. I would have needed a whole set of magic silverware then—to stop me from pulling a knife on her."

Lissa groaned. "Rose, you *cannot* make those kinds of jokes."

I grinned. "I say the things you're too afraid to."

This made her smile in return. "It's been a long time since I've heard that," she said softly. My trip to Russia had fractured our friendship—which had ended up showing me just how much it really meant to me.

We spent the rest of the time hanging out, talking about Adrian and other gossip. I was relieved to see she'd gotten over her earlier mood about Christian, but as the day progressed, her anxiety grew about our pending mission with Mia.

"It's going to be okay," I told her when the time came. We were heading back across the Court grounds, dressed in comfortable jeans and T-shirts. It was nice to be free of school curfew, but again, being out in the bright sunlight didn't make me feel very covert. "This'll be easy."

Lissa cut me a look but said nothing. The guardians were the security force in our world, and this was their headquarters. Breaking in was going to be anything but easy.

Mia looked determined when we reached her, though, and I felt encouraged by her attitude—and that she was wearing all black. True, it wouldn't do much in sunlight, but it made this all feel more legitimate. I was dying to know what had happened with Christian, and Lissa was too. Again, it was one of those topics best left unexplained.

Mia did, however, explain her plan to us, and I honestly felt it had about a 65 percent chance of working. Lissa was uneasy about her role since it involved compulsion, but she was a trooper and agreed to do it. We went over everything in detail a few more times and then set out to the building that housed guardian operations. I'd been there once before, when Dimitri had taken me to see Victor in the holding cells adjacent to the guardians' HQ. I'd never spent much time in the main offices before, and as Mia had predicted, they were lightly staffed this time of the day.

When we walked in, we were immediately met by a reception area like you'd find in any other administrative office. A stern guardian sat at a desk with a computer, filing cabinets and tables all around him. He probably didn't have much to do at this time of night, but he was still clearly on high alert. Beyond him was a door, and it held my attention. Mia had explained that it was a gateway to all the guardian secrets, to their records and main offices—and surveillance areas that monitored high-risk regions of the Court.

Stern or not, the guy had a small smile for Mia. "Isn't it a little late for you? You aren't here for lessons, are you?"

She grinned back. He must have been one of the guardians she'd grown friendly with during her time at Court. "Nah, just up with some friends and wanted to show them around."

He arched an eyebrow as he took in me and Lissa. He gave a slight nod of acknowledgment. "Princess Dragomir. Guardian Hathaway." Apparently our reputations preceded us. It was the first time I'd been addressed by my new

title. It startled me—and made me feel slightly guilty about betraying the group I'd just become a member of.

"This is Don," explained Mia. "Don, the princess has a favor to ask." She looked meaningfully at Lissa.

Lissa took a deep breath, and I felt the burnings of compulsion magic through our bond as she focused her gaze upon him. "Don," she said firmly, "give us the keys and codes to the records archives downstairs. And then make sure the cameras in those areas are turned off."

He frowned. "Why would I—" But as her eyes continued to hold his, I could see the compulsion seize him. The lines on his face smoothed into compliance, and I breathed a sigh of relief. Plenty of people were strong enough to resist compulsion—particularly that of ordinary Moroi. Lissa's was much stronger because of spirit, though you never knew if someone might break through.

"Of course," he said, standing up. He opened a desk drawer and handed Mia a set of keys that she promptly gave to me. "The code is 4312578."

I committed it to memory, and he beckoned us through the all-powerful door. Beyond it, corridors spread in all directions. He pointed to one on our right. "Down there. Take a left at the end, go downstairs two flights, and it's the door on the right."

Mia glanced at me to make sure I understood. I nodded, and she turned back to him. "Now make sure the surveillance is off."

"Take us there," said Lissa firmly.

Don couldn't resist her command, and she and Mia followed him, leaving me on my own. This part of the plan was all on me, and I hurried down the hall. The facility might be lightly staffed, but I could still run into someone—and would have no compulsion to help me talk my way out of trouble.

Don's directions were spot-on, but I still wasn't prepared when I punched in the code and entered the vault. Rows and rows of filing cabinets stretched down a huge hall. I couldn't see the end of it. Drawers were stacked five high, and the faint fluorescent lighting and eerie silence gave it all a spooky, almost haunted feel. All the guardians' information from before the digital age. God only knew how far back these records went. To medieval days in Europe? I suddenly felt daunted and wondered if I could pull this off.

I walked to the first cabinet on my left, relieved to see it was labeled. AA1 it read. Below it was AA2 and so forth. Oh dear. It was going to take me several cabinets to even get out of the As. I was grateful the organization was as simple as alphabetical order, but I now understood why these cabinets went on forever. I had to go back more than three quarters of the way down the room to get to the Ts. And it wasn't until I got to the TA27 drawer that I found the file for Tarasov Prison.

I gasped. The file was thick, filled with all sorts of documents. There were pages on the prison's history and its migration patterns, as well as floor plans for each of its locations. I could hardly believe it. So much information . . . but what did I need? What would be useful? The answer came quickly: *all of it.* I shut the drawer and tucked the folder under my arm. Okay. Time to get out of here.

I turned around and began heading for the exit at a light jog. Now that I had what I needed, the urgency of escape was pressing on me. I was almost there

when I heard a soft click, and the door opened. I froze as a dhampir I didn't recognize stepped through. He froze as well, clearly astonished, and I took it as a small blessing that he didn't immediately pin me against the wall and start interrogating me.

"You're Rose Hathaway," he said. Good lord. Was there anyone who didn't know who I was?

I tensed, unsure what to expect now, but spoke as though us meeting here made perfect sense. "So it would seem. Who are you?"

"Mikhail Tanner," he said, still puzzled. "What are you doing here?"

"Running an errand," I said breezily. I indicated the file. "The guardian on duty down here needed something."

"You're lying," he said. "*I'm* the guardian on archive duty. If someone needed something, they would have sent me."

Oh, shit. Talk about best-laid plans failing. Yet as I stood there, a strange thought came to me. His appearance wasn't familiar at all: curly brown hair, average height, late twenties. Pretty good-looking, really. But his name . . . something about his name . . .

"Ms. Karp," I gasped. "You're the one . . . you were involved with Ms. Karp."

He stiffened, blue eyes narrowing warily. "What do you know about that?"

I swallowed. What I'd done—or tried to do for Dimitri—wasn't without precedent. "You loved her. You went out to kill her after she . . . after she turned."

Ms. Karp had been a teacher of ours a few years ago. She'd been a spirit user, and as the effects of it began to drive her insane, she'd done the only thing she could to save her mind: become a Strigoi. Mikhail, her lover, had done the only thing *he'd* known to end that evil state: search for and kill her. It occurred to me that I was standing face-to-face with the hero of a love story nearly as dramatic as my own.

"But you never found her," I said softly. "Did you?"

He took a long time in answering, his eyes weighing me heavily. I wondered what he was thinking about. Her? His own pain? Or was he analyzing me?

"No," he said finally. "I had to stop. The guardians needed me more."

He spoke in that calm, controlled way that guardians excelled at, but in his eyes, I saw grief—a grief I more than understood. I hesitated before taking a shot at the only chance I had to not get busted and end up in a jail cell.

"I know . . . I know you have every reason to drag me out of here and turn me in. You should. It's what you're supposed to do—what I'd do too. But the thing is, this . . ." I again nodded at the folder. "Well, I'm kind of trying to do what you did. I'm trying to save someone."

He remained quiet. He could probably guess who I meant and assumed "save" meant "kill." If he knew who I was, he'd know who my mentor had been. Few knew about my romantic relationship with Dimitri, but me caring about him would have been a foregone conclusion.

"It's futile, you know," Mikhail said at last. This time, his voice cracked a little. "I tried . . . I tried so hard to find her. But when they disappear . . . when they don't want to be found . . ." He shook his head. "There's nothing we can do. I understand why you want to do it. Believe me, I do. But it's

impossible. You'll never find him if he doesn't want you to."

I wondered how much I could tell Mikhail—how much I should. It occurred to me then that if there was anyone else in this world who understood what I was going through, it would be this man. Besides, I didn't have a lot of options here.

"The thing is, I think I can find him," I said slowly. "He's looking for me."

"What?" Mikhail's eyebrows rose. "How do you know?"

"Because he, um, sends me letters about it."

That fierce warrior look immediately returned. "If you know this, if you *can* find him . . . you should get backup to kill him."

I flinched at those last words and again feared what I had to say next. "Would you believe me if I said there was a way to save him?"

"You mean by destroying him."

I shook my head. "No . . . I mean really save. A way to restore him to his original state."

"No," Mikhail said swiftly. "That's impossible."

"It might not be. I know someone who did it—who turned a Strigoi back." Okay, that was a small lie. I didn't actually know the person, but I wasn't going to get into the string of knowing-someone-who-knew-someone . . .

"That's impossible," Mikhail repeated. "Strigoi are dead. Undead. Same difference."

"What if there was a chance?" I said. "What if it could be done? What if Ms. Karp—if Sonya—could become Moroi again? What if you could be together again?" It'd also mean she'd be crazy again, but that was a technicality for later.

It felt like an eternity before he answered, and my anxiety grew. Lissa couldn't compel forever, and I'd told Mia I would be fast. This plan would fall apart if I didn't get out soon. Yet, watching him deliberate, I could see his mask falter. After all this time, he still loved his Sonya.

"If what you're saying is true—and I don't believe it—then I'm coming with you."

Whoa, no. Not in the plan. "You can't," I said swiftly. "I've already got people in place." Another small lie. "Adding more might ruin things. I'm not doing it alone," I said, cutting off what I figured would be his next argument. "If you really want to help me—really want to take a chance on bringing her back—you need to let me go."

"There's no way it can be true," he repeated. But there was doubt in his voice, and I played on it.

"Can you take that chance?"

More silence. I was starting to sweat now. Mikhail closed his eyes for a moment and took a deep breath. Then he stepped aside and gestured to the door. "Go."

I nearly sagged in relief and immediately grabbed the door handle. "Thank you. Thank you so much."

"I could get in a lot of trouble for this," he said wearily. "And I still don't believe it's possible."

"But you hope it is." I didn't need a response from him to know I was right. I opened the door, but before going through, I paused and glanced at him.

This time, he no longer hid the grief and pain in his face. “If you mean it . . . if you want to help . . . there might be a way you can.”

Another piece of the puzzle had unraveled itself for me, another way we might pull this off. I explained what I needed from him and was surprised at how quickly he agreed. He really was like me, I realized. We both knew the idea of bringing back Strigoi was impossible . . . and yet we so, so wanted to believe it could be done

I slipped back upstairs alone after that. Don wasn’t at his desk, and I wondered what Mia had done with him. I didn’t wait to find out and instead headed outside, off to a small courtyard that we’d established as our rendezvous point. Mia and Lissa were both waiting there, pacing. No longer distracted with anxiety, I opened myself to the bond and felt Lissa’s agitation.

“Thank God,” she said when she saw me. “We thought you’d been caught.”

“Well . . . it’s a long story.” One I didn’t bother with. “I got what I needed. And . . . I actually got a whole lot more. I think we can do this.”

Mia gave me a look that was both wry and wistful. “I sure do wish I knew what you guys were doing.”

I shook my head as the three of us walked away. “No,” I replied. “I’m not sure that you do.”

FIVE

I DECIDED IT'D BE BEST if Lissa and I stayed up late when we returned to her room, poring over the documents. She was a jumble of feelings when I told her about my encounter with Mikhail—which I hadn't mentioned to Mia. Lissa's initial reaction was surprise, but there were other things too. Fear over the trouble I could have gotten into. A bit of warm romanticism over what both Mikhail and I were willing to do for those we loved. Wonder if she would do the same if Christian were in that situation. She decided instantly that she would; her love for him was still that strong. Then she told herself that she actually didn't care about him anymore, which I would have found annoying if I wasn't so distracted.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

I'd sighed aloud in dismay without realizing it while I read her thoughts. Not wanting her to know I'd been perusing her mind, I pointed at the papers spread out on her bed. "Just trying to make sense of this." Not entirely that far off from the truth.

The prison's layout was complex. The cells occupied two floors and were tiny—only one prisoner per cell. The papers didn't explain why, but the reason was obvious. It went along with what Abe had said about keeping criminals from turning Strigoi. If I'd been locked away in prison for years, I could understand the temptation of cracking and killing my roommate to become Strigoi and escape. The cells were also kept housed in the very center of the building, surrounded by guards, offices, "exercise rooms," a kitchen, and a feeders' room. The documents explained guard rotations, as well as prisoner feeding schedules. They were apparently escorted to the feeders one at a time, heavily guarded, and only allowed very short spurts of blood. Again, everything kept the prisoners weak and prevented them from turning Strigoi.

It was all good information, but I had no reason to believe any of it was up-to-date, since the file was five years old. It was also likely the prison had all sorts of new surveillance equipment in place. Probably the only things we could count on being the same were the prison's location and the building's layout.

"How good are you feeling about your charm-making skills?" I asked Lissa.

Although she hadn't been able to put as much spirit healing into my ring as a woman I knew named Oksana could, I had noticed my darkness-induced temper soothed a little. Lissa'd made a ring for Adrian too, though I couldn't say for sure if it was what was helping him control his vices lately—vices he usually indulged in to control spirit.

She shrugged and rolled over onto her back. Exhaustion filled her, but she was trying to stay awake for my sake. "Getting better. Wish I could meet Oksana."

"Maybe someday," I said vaguely. I didn't think Oksana would ever leave

Siberia. She'd run off with her guardian and wanted to keep a low profile. Besides, I didn't want Lissa over there anytime soon after my ordeals. "Have you been able to put in anything besides healing?" A moment later, I answered my own question. "Oh, right. The spoon."

Lissa grimaced, but it turned into a yawn. "I don't think it worked so well."

"Hmm."

"Hmm?"

I glanced back at the blueprints. "I'm thinking if you could make a few more compulsion charms, it would go a long way to help with this. We need to make people see what we want them to see." Surely if Victor—whose powers of compulsion were nowhere near hers—had managed a lust charm, she could do what I needed. She just needed more practice. She understood the basic principles but had trouble making her desired effects last. The only problem was that in asking her to do this, I was making her use more spirit. Even if the side effects didn't show up right away, they would likely come back to haunt her in the future.

She glanced at me curiously, but when I saw her yawn again, I told her not to worry about it. I'd explain tomorrow. She offered no argument, and after a quick hug, we each retired to our own beds. We weren't going to get much sleep, but we had to get what we could. Tomorrow was a big day.

I'd worn a variation of the guardians' formal black-and-white outfit when I went to Victor's trial. In normal bodyguard situations, we wore ordinary clothes. But for fancy events, they wanted us looking crisp and professional. The morning after our daring break-in, I got my first true taste of guardian fashion.

I'd worn hand-me-down clothes at Victor's trial but now had an official guardian outfit, tailored exactly to my measurements: straight-legged black slacks, a white button-up blouse, and a black dress jacket that fit me perfectly. It certainly wasn't meant to be sexy, but the way it hugged my stomach and hips did good things for my body. I felt satisfied with my reflection in the mirror, and after several minutes of thought, I pulled my hair into a neatly braided bun that showed off my *molnija* marks. The skin was still irritated, but at least the bandage was gone. I looked very . . . professional. I was actually kind of reminded of Sydney. She was an Alchemist—a human who worked with Moroi and dhampirs to hide the existence of vampires from the world. With her proper sense of fashion, she always looked ready for a business meeting. I kept wanting to send her a briefcase for Christmas.

If ever there was a time for me to show off, today was the day. After the trials and graduation, this was the next biggest step in becoming a guardian. It was a luncheon that all new grads attended. Moroi eligible for new guardians would also attend, hoping to scope out the candidates. Our scores from school and the trials would have been made public knowledge by now, and this was a chance for Moroi to meet us and put in bids for who they wanted to guard them. Naturally, most guests would be royal, but a few other important Moroi would also qualify.

I really had no interest in showing off and hooking a posh family. Lissa was

the only one I wanted to guard. Still, I had to make a good impression. I needed to make it clear that *I* was the one who should be with her.

She and I walked over to the royal ballroom together. It was the only place large enough to hold us all, since more than just St. Vladimir's grads were in attendance. All the American schools had sent their new recruits, and for a moment, I found the sea of black and white dizzying. Bits of color—royals dressed up in their finest clothing—livened the palette up a little. Around us, soft watercolor murals made the walls seem to glow. Lissa hadn't worn a ball gown or anything, but she looked very elegant in a formfitting teal dress made of raw silk.

The royals mingled with the social ease they'd been raised with, but my classmates moved about uneasily. No one seemed to mind. It wasn't our job to seek out others; we would be approached. The grads all wore name tags—engraved metal ones. There were no HELLO, MY NAME IS . . . stickers here. The tags made us identifiable so that the royals could come and do their interrogations.

I didn't expect anyone except my friends to talk to me, so Lissa and I headed straight for the buffet and then occupied a quiet corner to munch on our canapés and caviar. Well, Lissa ate caviar. It reminded me too much of Russia.

Adrian, of course, sought us out first. I gave him a crooked grin. "What are you doing here? I know you aren't eligible for a guardian."

With no concrete plans for his future, it was assumed Adrian would simply live at Court. As such, he'd need no outside protection—though he'd certainly qualify if he chose to strike out into the world.

"True, but I could hardly miss a party," he said. He held a glass of champagne in his hand, and I wondered if the effects of the ring Lissa had given him were wearing off. Of course, the occasional drink really wasn't the end of the world, and the dating proposal's language had been loose in that area. It was mostly the smoking I wanted him to stay away from. "Have you been approached by a dozen hopeful people?"

I shook my head. "Who wants reckless Rose Hathaway? The one who drops out without warning to do her own thing?"

"Plenty," he said. "I sure do. You kicked ass in the battle, and remember—everyone thinks you went off on some Strigoi-killing spree. Some might think it's worth your crazy personality."

"He's right," a voice suddenly said. I looked up and saw Tasha Ozera standing near us, a small smile on her scarred face. In spite of the disfigurement, I thought she looked beautiful today—more royal than I'd ever seen her. Her long black hair gleamed, and she wore a navy skirt and lacy tank top. She even had on high heels and jewelry—something I was certain I'd never seen her wearing.

I was happy to see her; I hadn't known she'd come to Court. An odd thought occurred to me. "Have they finally let you have a guardian?" The royals had a lot of quiet, polite ways of shunning those who were in disgrace. In the Ozeras' case, their guardian allotment had been cut in half as kind of a punishment for what Christian's parents had done. It was totally unfair. The Ozeras deserved the same rights as any other royal family.

She nodded. "I think they're hoping it'll shut me up about Moroi fighting

with dhampirs. Kind of a bribe."

"One you won't fall for, I'm sure."

"Nope. If anything, it'll just give me someone to practice with." Her smile faded, and she cast uncertain looks among us. "I hope you won't be offended . . . but I put in a request for you, Rose."

Lissa and I exchanged startled glances. "Oh." I didn't know what else to say.

"I hope they'll give you to Lissa," Tasha added hastily, clearly uncomfortable. "But the queen seems pretty dead-set on her own choices. If that's the case . . ."

"It's okay," I said. "If I can't be with Lissa, then I really would rather be with you." It was the truth. I wanted Lissa more than anyone else in the world, but if they kept us apart, then I'd absolutely prefer Tasha to some snobby royal. Of course, I was pretty sure my odds of getting assigned to her were as bad as those of getting assigned to Lissa. Those who were angry at me for running off would go out of their way to put me in the most unpleasant situation possible. And even if she was being granted a guardian, I had a feeling Tasha's preferences wouldn't be high priority either. My future was still a big question mark.

"Hey," exclaimed Adrian, offended that I hadn't named him as my second choice.

I shook my head at him. "You know they'd assign me to a woman anyway. Besides, you've got to do something with your life to earn a guardian."

I meant it jokingly, but a small frown made me think I might have actually hurt his feelings. Tasha, meanwhile, looked relieved. "I'm glad you don't mind. In the meantime, I'll do what I can to help you two." She rolled her eyes. "Not that my opinion counts for much."

Sharing my misgivings about getting assigned to Tasha seemed pointless. Instead, I started to thank her for the offer, but we were then joined by yet another visitor: Daniella Ivashkov. "Adrian," she chastised gently, a small smile on her face, "you can't keep Rose and Vasilisa all to yourself." She turned to Lissa and me. "The queen would like to see you both."

Lovely. We both stood up, but Adrian remained sitting, having no desire to visit his aunt. Tasha apparently didn't either. Seeing her, Daniella gave a curt, polite nod. "Lady Ozera." She then walked away, assuming we'd follow. I found it ironic that Daniella seemed willing to accept me but still held that typical aloof Ozera-prejudice. I guess her niceness only went so far.

Tasha, however, had long since grown immune to that sort of treatment. "Have fun," she said. She looked over at Adrian. "More champagne?"

"Lady Ozera," he said grandly, "you and I are two minds with a single thought."

I hesitated before following Lissa to Tatiana. I'd taken in Tasha's grand appearance but only now really paid attention to something. "Is all your jewelry silver?" I asked.

She absentmindedly touched the opal necklace around her neck. Her fingers were adorned with three rings. "Yes," she said, confused. "Why?"

"This is going to sound really weird . . . well, maybe not compared to my normal weirdness. But could we, um, borrow all of those?"

Lissa shot me a look and immediately guessed my motives. We needed more

charms and were short on silver. Tasha arched an eyebrow, but like so many of my friends, she had a remarkable ability to roll with weird ideas.

"Sure," she said. "But can I give them to you later? I don't really want to strip my jewelry in the middle of this party."

"No problem."

"I'll have them sent to your room."

With that settled, Lissa and I walked over to where Tatiana was surrounded by admirers and those wanting to suck up. Daniella had to be mistaken in saying Tatiana wanted to see *both* of us. The memory of her yelling at me over Adrian still burned in my head, and dinner at the Ivashkovs' hadn't fooled me into thinking the queen and I were suddenly best friends.

Yet, astonishingly, when she caught sight of Lissa and me, she was all smiles. "Vasilisa. And Rosemarie." She beckoned us closer, and the group parted. I approached with Lissa, my steps tentative. Was I going to get yelled at in front of all these people?

Apparently not. There were always new royals to meet, and Tatiana first introduced Lissa to all of them. Everyone was curious about the Dragomir princess. I was introduced as well, though the queen didn't go out of her way to sing my praises as she did Lissa's. Still, being acknowledged at all was incredible.

"Vasilisa," said Tatiana, once the formalities were finished, "I was thinking you should visit Lehigh soon. Arrangements are being made for you to go in, oh, maybe a week and a half. We thought it would be a nice treat for your birthday. Serena and Grant will accompany you, naturally, and I'll send a few others." Serena and Grant were the guardians who had replaced Dimitri and me as Lissa's future protection. Of course they'd be going with her. Then, Tatiana said the most startling thing of all. "And you can go too, if you'd like, Rose. Vasilisa could hardly celebrate without you."

Lissa lit up. Lehigh University. The lure that had made her accept a life at Court. Lissa yearned for as much knowledge as she could get, and the queen had given her a chance at it. The prospect of a visit totally filled her with eagerness and excitement—especially if she could celebrate her eighteenth birthday there with me. It was enough to distract her from Victor and Christian, which was saying something.

"Thank you, Your Majesty. That'd be great."

There was a strong possibility, I knew, that we might not be around for this scheduled visit—not if my plan for Victor worked. But I didn't want to ruin Lissa's happiness—and I could hardly mention it in this royal crowd. I was also kind of stunned that I'd been invited at all. After issuing the invite, the queen said nothing else to me and continued speaking with the others around her. Yet, she'd been pleasant—for *her*, at least—while addressing me, just as she had at the Ivashkov home. Not best-friend nice but certainly not raving-bitch insane, either. Maybe Daniella had been right.

More pleasantries followed as everyone chatted and tried to impress the queen, and it soon became clear that I was no longer needed. Glancing around the room, I found someone I needed to talk to and meekly separated myself from the group, knowing Lissa could fend for herself.

"Eddie," I called, reaching the other side of the ballroom. "Alone at last."

Eddie Castile, a longtime friend of mine, grinned when he saw me. He too was a dhampir, tall with a long, narrow face that still had a cute, boyish look to it. He had tamed his dark, sandy-blond hair for a change. Lissa had once hoped Eddie and I would date, but he and I were strictly just friends. His best friend had been Mason, a sweet guy who'd been crazy about me and who had been murdered by Strigoi. After his death, Eddie and I had adopted protective attitudes toward each other. He'd later been kidnapped during the attack at St. Vladimir's, and his experiences had made him a serious and determined guardian—sometimes a little *too* serious. I wanted him to have more fun and was delighted to see the happy glint in his hazel eyes now.

"I think every royal in the room's been trying to bribe you," I teased. It wasn't entirely a joke. I'd been keeping an eye on him throughout the party, and there'd always been someone with him. His record was stellar. Surviving the awful events in his life might have scarred him, but they reflected well on his skills. He had great grades and ratings from the trial. Most importantly, he didn't have my reckless reputation. He was a good catch.

"Kind of seems that way." He laughed. "I didn't really expect it."

"You're so modest. You're the hottest thing in this room."

"Not compared to you."

"Yeah. As shown by the people lining up to talk to me. Tasha Ozera's the only one who wants me as far as I know. And Lissa, of course."

Lines of thought creased Eddie's face. "Could be worse."

"It will be worse. No way will I get either of them."

We fell silent, and a sudden anxiety filled me. I'd come to ask a favor of Eddie, and it no longer seemed like a good idea. Eddie was on the verge of a shining career. He was a loyal friend, and I'd been certain he'd help with what I needed . . . but I suddenly didn't think I could ask. Like Mia, however, Eddie was observant.

"What's wrong, Rose?" His voice was concerned—that protective nature kicking in.

I shook my head. I couldn't do it. "Nothing."

"*Rose*," he said warningly.

I looked away, unable to meet his eyes. "It's not important. Really." I'd find another way, someone else.

To my surprise, he reached out to touch my chin and tip my head back up. His gaze caught mine, allowing no escape. "What do you need?"

I stared at him for a long time. I was so selfish, risking the lives and reputations of friends I cared about. If Christian and Lissa weren't on the outs, I'd be asking him, too. But Eddie was all that was left to me.

"I need something . . . something that's pretty extreme."

His face was still serious, but his lips tugged into a wry smile. "Everything you do is extreme, Rose."

"Not like this. This is . . . well, it's something that could ruin everything for you. Get you in big trouble. I can't do that to you."

That half smile vanished. "It doesn't matter," he said fiercely. "If you need me, I'll do it. No matter what it is."

"You don't know what it is."

"I trust you."

"It's kind of illegal. Treasonous, even."

That took him aback for a moment, but he stayed resolute. "Whatever you need. I don't care. I've got your back." I'd saved Eddie's life twice, and I knew he meant what he said. He felt indebted to me. He would go wherever I asked, not out of romantic love, but out of friendship and loyalty.

"It's illegal," I repeated. "You'd have to sneak out of Court . . . tonight. And I don't know when we'd be back." It was entirely possible that we *wouldn't* come back. If we had a run-in with prison guards . . . well, they might take lethal measures to do their duty. It was what all of us had trained for. But I couldn't pull this breakout off with Lissa's compulsion alone. I needed another fighter at my back.

"Just tell me when."

And that was all there was to it. I didn't tell him the full extent of our plan, but I gave him that night's rendezvous location and told him what he would need to bring. He never questioned me. He said he'd be there. New royals came to talk to him just then, and I left him, knowing he'd show up later. It was hard, but I pushed aside my guilt over possibly endangering his future.

Eddie arrived, just as he'd promised, when my plan unfolded later that night. Lissa did too. Again, *night* meant "broad daylight." I felt that same anxiety I did when we'd sneaked around with Mia. Light exposed everything, but then, most people were asleep. Lissa, Eddie, and I still moved through the Court's grounds as covertly as we could, meeting Mikhail in a section of the compound that held all sorts of garaged vehicles. The garages were big metal, industrial-looking buildings set on the fringes of Court, and no one else was out.

We slipped into the garage he'd indicated last night, and I was relieved to find no one else there. He surveyed the three of us, looking surprised at my "strike team," but he offered no questions and made no further attempts to join us. More guilt surged up within me. Here was someone else who was risking his future for me.

"Gonna be a tight fit," he mused.

I forced a smile. "We're all friends here."

Mikhail didn't laugh at my joke but instead popped the trunk of a black Dodge Charger. He wasn't kidding about the tight fit. It was a newer one, which was kind of a shame. An older model would have been bigger, but guardians only kept top-of-the-line stuff around.

"Once we're far enough away, I'll pull over and let you out," he said.

"We'll be fine," I assured him. "Let's do this."

Lissa, Eddie, and I crawled into the trunk. "Oh God," muttered Lissa. "I hope no one's claustrophobic."

It was like a bad game of Twister. The trunk was large enough for some luggage but not intended for three people. We were squeezed together, and personal space was nonexistent. We were all up close and personal. Satisfied we were all snug, Mikhail closed the trunk and darkness engulfed us. The engine started a minute later, and I felt the car move.

"How long until you think we stop?" asked Lissa. "Or die from carbon

monoxide poisoning?"

"We haven't even left the Court yet," I noted. She sighed.

The car drove off, and not too long afterward, we came to a stop. Mikhail must have reached the gates and been chatting with the guards. He'd told me earlier that he'd come up with some excuse or other to run an errand, and we had no reason to believe the guards would question him or search the car. The Court wasn't worried about people sneaking out, like our school had been. The biggest concern here was people getting inside.

A minute passed, and I uneasily wondered if there was a problem. Then the car moved again, and all three of us exhaled in relief. We picked up speed, and after what I suspected was a mile or so, the car veered sideways and came to a stop. The trunk popped open, and we spilled out of it. I'd never been so grateful for fresh air. I got in the passenger seat beside Mikhail, and Lissa and Eddie took the back. Once we were settled, Mikhail continued driving without another word.

I allowed myself a few more moments of guilt over the people I'd involved but then let it go. It was too late to worry now. I also let go of my guilt about Adrian. He would have been a good ally, but I could hardly ask for his help in this.

And with that, I settled back and turned my thoughts to the job before us. It would take us about an hour to get to the airport, and from there, the three of us were off to Alaska.

SIX

"YOU KNOW WHAT WE NEED?"

I was sitting between Eddie and Lissa, on our flight from Seattle to Fairbanks. As the shortest—marginally—and the mastermind, I'd gotten stuck with the middle seat.

"A new plan?" asked Lissa.

"A miracle?" asked Eddie.

I paused and glared at them both before responding. Since when had they become the comedians here? "*No*. Stuff. We need cool gadgets if we're going to pull this off." I tapped the prison blueprint that had been on my lap for almost every part of our trip so far. Mikhail had dropped us off at a small airport an hour away from the Court. We'd caught a commuter flight from there to Philadelphia, and from there to Seattle and now Fairbanks. It reminded me a little of the crazy flights I'd had to take from Siberia back to the U.S. That journey had also gone via Seattle. I was starting to believe that city was a gateway to obscure places.

"I thought the only tools we needed were our wits," mused Eddie. He might be serious about his guardian work most of the time, but he could also turn on his dry humor when relaxed. Not that he was totally at ease with our mission here, now that he knew more of (but not all) the details. I knew he'd snap back into readiness once we landed. He'd been understandably shocked when I'd revealed we were freeing Victor Dashkov. I hadn't told Eddie anything about Dimitri or spirit, only that getting Victor out played a larger role in the greater good. Eddie's trust in me was so implicit that he'd taken me at my word and pursued the issue no further. I wondered how he'd react when he learned the truth.

"At the very least, we're going to need a GPS," I said. "There's only latitude and longitude on this thing. No real directions."

"Shouldn't be hard," said Lissa, turning a bracelet over and over in her hands. She'd opened her tray and spread out Tasha's jewelry across it. "I'm sure even Alaska has modern technology." She'd also turned on a droll attitude, even with anxiety radiating through the bond.

Eddie's good mood faded a little. "I hope you aren't thinking of guns or anything like that."

"No. Absolutely not. If this works how we want, no one will even know we're there." A physical confrontation was likely, but I hoped to minimize serious injury.

Lissa sighed and handed me the bracelet. She was worried because a lot of my plan depended on her charms—literally and figuratively. "I don't know if this'll work, but maybe it'll give you more resistance."

I took the bracelet and slipped it on my wrist. I felt nothing, but I only rarely did with charmed objects. I'd left Adrian a note saying that Lissa and I

had wanted to escape for a "girls' getaway" before my assignment and her college visit. I knew he'd be hurt. The girl angle would carry a lot of weight, but he'd feel injured at not being invited along on a daring vacation—if he even believed we were on one. He probably knew me well enough by now to guess most of my actions had ulterior motives. My hope was that he'd spread the story to Court officials when our disappearance was noticed. We'd still get in trouble, but a wild weekend was better than a prison break. And honestly, how could things get worse for me? The one flaw here was that Adrian could visit my dreams and grill me on what was really going on. It was one of the more interesting—and occasionally annoying—spirit abilities. Lissa hadn't learned to walk dreams, but she had a crude understanding of the principle. Between that and compulsion, she'd tried to charm the bracelet in a way that would block Adrian when I slept later.

The plane began its descent into Fairbanks, and I gazed out the window at tall pines and stretches of green land. In Lissa's thoughts, I read how she'd been half-expecting glaciers and snowbanks, despite knowing it was full summer here. After Siberia, I'd learned to keep an open mind about regional stereotypes. My biggest concern was the sun. It had been full daylight when we'd left the Court, and as our travels took us west, the time zone change meant that the sun stayed with us. Now, though it was almost nine in the evening, we had a full, sunny blue sky, thanks to our northern latitude.

It was like a giant safety blanket. I hadn't mentioned this to Lissa or Eddie, but it seemed likely Dimitri would have spies everywhere. I was untouchable at St. Vladimir's and the Court, but his letters had clearly stated he'd be waiting for me to leave those boundaries. I didn't know the extent of his logistics, but humans watching the Court in daylight wouldn't have surprised me. And even though I'd left hidden in a trunk, there was a strong possibility that Dimitri was already in pursuit. But the same light that guarded the prisoners would keep us safe too. We'd barely have a few hours of night to guard against, and if we pulled this off quickly, we'd be out of Alaska in hardly any time at all. Of course, that might not be such a good thing. We'd lose the sun.

Our first complication came after we landed and tried to rent a car. Eddie and I were eighteen, but none of the car companies would rent to anyone so young. After the third refusal, my anger began to grow. Who would have thought we'd be delayed by something so idiotic? Finally, at a fourth counter, the woman hesitantly told us that there was a guy about a mile from the airport who would likely rent us a car if we had a credit card and a big enough deposit.

We made the walk in pleasant weather, but I could tell the sun was starting to bother Lissa by the time we reached our destination. Bud—of Bud's Rental Cars—didn't seem *quite* as sleazy as expected and did indeed rent us a car when we produced enough money. From there, we got a room at a modest motel and went over our plans again.

All our information indicated that the prison ran on a vampire schedule, which meant this was their active time of the day. Our plan was to stay in the hotel until the following day, when the Moroi "night" came, and catch some sleep beforehand. It gave Lissa more time to work on her charms. Our room

was easily defendable.

My sleep was Adrian-free, for which I was grateful, meaning he'd either accepted the girl trip or couldn't break through Lissa's bracelet. In the morning, we rustled up some doughnuts for breakfast and ate a little bleary-eyed. Running against our vampire schedule was throwing us all off a little.

The sugar helped kick-start us, though, and Eddie and I left Lissa around ten to go do some scouting. We bought my coveted GPS and a few other things at a sporting goods store along the way and used it to navigate remote country roads that seemed to lead nowhere. When the GPS claimed we were a mile from the prison, we pulled off to the side of a small dirt road and set off on foot across a field of tall grass that stretched endlessly before us.

"I thought Alaska was tundra," said Eddie, crunching through the tall stalks. The sky was blue and clear again, with only a few clouds that did nothing to keep the sun away. I'd started out in a light jacket but now had it tied around my waist as I sweated. Occasionally a welcome gust of wind would roll through, flattening the grass and whipping my hair around.

"I guess not all parts. Or maybe we have to go further north. Oh, hey. This looks promising."

We came to a stop before a high, barbwire fence with an enormous PRIVATE PROPERTY—NO UNAUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ALLOWED sign on it. The lettering was red, apparently to emphasize how serious they were. Personally, I would have added a skull and crossbones to really drive the message home.

Eddie and I studied the fence for a few moments, then gave each other resigned glances. "Lissa will heal up anything we get," I said hopefully.

Climbing barbed wire isn't impossible, but it's not fun. Tossing my jacket on the wires I had to grip went a long way to protect me, but I still ended up with some scratches and snagged clothing. Once I was at the top, I jumped down, preferring the jolting landing to another climb down. Eddie did the same, grimacing at the hard impact.

We walked a little farther, and then the dark line of a building came into sight. We both came to a halt as one and knelt down, seeking what coverage we could in the grass. The prison file had indicated that they had cameras on the outside, which meant we risked detection if we got too close. I'd bought high-power binoculars along with the GPS and took them out now, studying the building's exterior.

The binoculars were good—really good—as well they should have been for the price. The level of detail was amazing. Like so many Moroi creations, the building was a mixture of the old and the new. The walls were made of sinister gray stone blocks and almost entirely obscured the actual prison, whose roof just barely peeped above. A couple of figures paced along the top of the walls, living eyes to go with the cameras. The place looked like a fortress, impenetrable and inescapable. It deserved to be on a rocky cliff, with a sinister black sky behind it. The field and sun seemed out of place.

I handed the binoculars to Eddie. He made his own assessment and then gestured to the left. "There."

Squinting, I just barely made out a truck or SUV driving up toward the prison. It went around the back and vanished from sight. "Our only way in," I

murmured, recalling the blueprint. We knew we had no shot of scaling the walls or even getting close enough on foot without being spotted. We needed to literally walk through the front door, and that's where the plan got a little sketchy.

Eddie lowered the binoculars and glanced over at me, brow furrowed. "I meant what I said before, you know. I trust you. Whatever reason you're doing this, I know it's a good one. But before things start moving, are you *sure* this is what you want?"

I gave a harsh laugh. "Want? No. But it's what we need to do."

He nodded. "Good enough."

We watched the prison a while longer, moving around to get different angles while still keeping a wide perimeter. The scenario was about what we'd expected, but having a 3-D visual was still helpful.

After about a half hour, we returned to the hotel. Lissa sat cross-legged on one of the beds, still working on the charms. The feelings coming through her were warm and content. Spirit always made her feel good—even if it had side effects later—and she thought she was making progress.

"Adrian called my cell phone twice," she told me when we entered.

"But you didn't answer?"

"Nope. Poor guy."

I shrugged. "It's better this way."

We gave her a rundown of what we'd seen, and her happy mood began to plummet. Our visit made what we were going to do later today more and more real, and working with so much spirit had already put her on edge. A few moments later, I sensed her swallowing her fear. She became resolved. She'd told me she would do this and she intended to stand by her word, even though she dreaded each second that brought her closer to Victor Dashkov.

Lunch followed, and then a few hours later, it was time to put the plan into motion. It was early evening for humans, which meant the vampiric night would be drawing to an end soon. It was now or never. Lissa nervously distributed the charms she'd made for us, worried they wouldn't work. Eddie dressed up in his newly bestowed black-and-white guardian formalwear while Lissa and I stayed in our street clothes—with a couple alterations. Lissa's hair was a mousy brown, the result of some wash-in temporary hair color. My hair was tightly bound up underneath a curly red wig that reminded me uncomfortably of my mother. We sat in the backseat of the car while Eddie drove us chauffeur style back along the remote road we'd followed earlier. Unlike before, we didn't pull over. We stayed on the road, driving right up to the prison—or, well, to its gatehouse. No one spoke as we drove, but the tension and anxiety within us all grew and grew.

Before we could even get near the outer wall, there was a checkpoint manned by a guardian. Eddie brought the car to a stop, and I tried to look calm. He lowered the window, and the guardian on duty walked over and knelt so that they were at eye level.

"What's your business here?"

Eddie handed over a piece of paper, his attitude confident and unconcerned, as though this were perfectly normal. "Dropping off new feeders."

The file had contained all sorts of forms and papers for prison business,

including status reports and order forms for supplies—like feeders. We'd made a copy of one of the feeder requisition forms and filled it out.

"I wasn't notified of a delivery," the guardian said, not suspicious so much as puzzled. He peered at the paperwork. "This is an old form."

Eddie shrugged. "It's just what they gave me. I'm kind of new at this."

The man grinned. "Yeah, you barely look old enough to be out of school."

He glanced toward Lissa and me, and despite my practiced control, I tensed. The guardian frowned as he studied us. Lissa had given me a necklace, and she'd taken a ring, both charmed with a slight compulsion spell to make others think we were human. It would have been much easier to make her victim wear a charm and force them to think they were seeing humans, but that wasn't possible. The magic was harder this way. He squinted, almost like he was looking at us through a haze. If the charms had worked perfectly, he wouldn't have given us a second glance. The charms were a little flawed. They were changing our appearances but not quite as clearly as we'd hoped. That was why we'd gone to the trouble of altering our hair: if the human-illusion failed, we'd still have some identity protection. Lissa readied herself to work direct compulsion, though we'd hoped it wouldn't come to that with every person we met.

A few moments later, the guardian turned from us, apparently deciding we were human after all. I exhaled and unclenched my fists. I hadn't even realized I'd been holding them. "Hang on a minute, and I'll call this in," he told Eddie.

The guardian stepped away and picked up a phone inside his booth. Eddie glanced back at us. "So far so good?"

"Aside from the old form," I grumbled.

"No way to know if my charm's working?" asked Eddie.

Lissa had given him one of Tasha's rings, charmed to make him appear tan-skinned and black-haired. Since she wasn't altering his race, the magic only needed to blur his features. Like our human charms, I suspected it wasn't projecting the exact image she'd hoped for, but it should have altered his appearance enough that no one would identify Eddie later. With our resistance to compulsion—and knowing there was a charm in place, which negated its effects on us—Lissa and I couldn't say for certain what he looked like to others.

"I'm sure it's fine," said Lissa reassuringly.

The guardian returned. "They say go on in, and they'll sort it out there."

"Thanks," said Eddie, taking the form back.

The guard's attitude implied that he assumed this was a clerical error. He was still diligent, but the idea of someone sneaking feeders into a prison was hardly the kind of thing one would expect—or view as a security risk. Poor guy.

Two guardians greeted us when we arrived at the door in the prison's wall. The three of us got out and were led into the grounds between the wall and the prison itself. Whereas St. Vladimir's and the Court's grounds had been lush and filled with plants and trees, the land here was stark and lonely. Not even grass, just hard-packed earth. Was this what served as the prisoners' "exercise area"? Were they even allowed outside at all? I was surprised there wasn't a

moat of some sort out here.

The inside of the building was as grim as its exterior. The holding cells at Court were sterile and cold, all metal and blank walls. I'd expected something similar. But whoever had designed Tarasov had foregone the modern look and instead emulated the kind of prison one might have found back in Romania in medieval days. The harsh stone walls continued down the hall, gray and foreboding, and the air was chill and damp. It had to make for unpleasant working conditions for the guardians assigned here. Presumably they wanted to ensure the intimidating façade extended everywhere, even for prisoners first entering the gates. According to our blueprint, there was a little section of dorms where employees lived. Hopefully those were nicer.

Dark Ages décor or not, we passed the occasional camera as we walked down the hallway. This place's security was in no way primitive. Occasionally we heard the heavy slamming of a door, but overall, there was a perfect, eerie silence that was almost creepier than shouts and screams.

We were taken to the warden's office, a room that still had the same gloomy architecture yet was filled with the usual administrative accessories: desk, computer, etc. It looked efficient, nothing more. Our escorts explained that we were going to see the assistant warden, since the senior one was still in bed. It figured. The subordinate would have gotten stuck with the night shift. I hoped that meant he was tired and unobservant. Probably not. That rarely happened to guardians, no matter their assignments.

"Theo Marx," said the assistant warden, shaking Eddie's hand. He was a dhampir not much older than us, and I wondered if he'd only been freshly assigned here.

"Larry Brown," replied Eddie. We'd come up with a boring name for him, one that wouldn't stand out, and had used it in the paperwork.

Theo didn't speak to Lissa and me, but he did give us that same puzzled glance the first guy had as the charm's glamour attempted its illusion. Another delay followed, but once more, we slipped through. Theo returned his attention to Eddie and took the requisition form.

"This is different from the usual one," he said.

"I have no clue," said Eddie apologetically. "This is my first time."

Theo sighed and glanced at the clock. "The warden'll be on duty in another couple hours. I think we're just going to have to wait until he's here to figure out what's going on. Sommerfield's usually got their act together."

There were a few Moroi facilities in the country that gathered feeders—those on the fringes of human society who were content to spend their lives high on vampire endorphins—and then distributed them. Sommerfield was the name of one such facility, located in Kansas City.

"I'm not the only new person they just received," Eddie said. "Maybe someone got confused."

"Typical," snorted Theo. "Well, you might as well have a seat and wait. I can get coffee if you want."

"When are we getting a feeding?" I suddenly asked, using the whiniest, dreamiest voice I could. "It's been so long."

Lissa followed my lead. "They said we could when we got here."

Eddie rolled his eyes at what was typical feeder behavior. "They've been

like this the whole time."

"I can imagine," said Theo. "Humph. Feeders." The door to his office was partially ajar and he called out of it. "Hey, Wes? Can you come here?"

One of the escort guardians stuck his head inside. "Yeah?"

Theo gave us a dismissive wave. "Take these two down to the feeding area so they don't drive us crazy. If someone's up, they can use them."

Wes nodded and beckoned us out. Eddie and I made the briefest of eye contact. His face betrayed nothing, but I knew he was nervous. Getting Victor out was our job now, and Eddie didn't like sending us to the dragon's lair.

Wes led us through more doors and security checkpoints as we went deeper into the prison. I realized that for every layer of security I crossed to get in, I was going to have to cross it again to escape. According to the blueprint, the feeding area was situated on the opposite side of the prison. I'd assumed we'd take some route along the periphery, but instead we cut right through the building's center—where the prisoners were kept. Studying had given me a sense of the layout, but Lissa didn't realize where we were headed until a sign alerted us: WARNING—NOW ENTERING PRISONER AREA (CRIMINAL). I thought that was an odd wording. Wasn't everyone in here a criminal?

Heavy double doors blocked this section off, and Wes used both an electronic code and a physical key to cross through. Lissa's pace didn't change, but I felt her anxiety increase as we entered a long corridor lined with bar-covered cells. I didn't feel any better about it myself, but Wes—while still alert—didn't display any sign of fear. He entered this area all the time, I realized. He knew its security. The prisoners might be dangerous, but passing by them was a routine activity for him.

Still, peeking inside the cells nearly made my heart stop. The little compartments were as dark and gloomy as anything, containing only bare-bones furnishings. Most of the prisoners were asleep, thankfully. A few, however, watched as we walked by. None of them said anything, but the silence was almost scarier. Some of the Moroi held there looked like ordinary people you'd pass on the street, and I wondered what they could have possibly done to end up here. Their faces were sad, devoid of all hope. I did a double take and realized that some of the prisoners weren't Moroi; they were dhampirs. It made sense but still caught me off guard. My own kind would have criminals that needed to be dealt with, too.

But not all of the prisoners appeared benign. Others looked like they definitely belonged in Tarasov. There was a malevolence about them, a sinister feel as their eyes locked onto us and didn't let go. They scrutinized our every detail, though for what reason, I couldn't say. Were they seeking out anything that might offer escape? Could they see through our façades? Were they simply hungry? I didn't know but felt grateful for the silent guardians posted throughout the hall. I was also grateful that I didn't see Victor and assumed he lived in a different hall. We couldn't risk being recognized yet.

We finally exited the prisoners' corridor through another set of double doors and at last reached the feeding area. It too felt like a medieval dungeon, but images had to be kept up for the sake of the prisoners. Décor aside, the feeding room's layout was similar to what St. Vladimir's had, except it was smaller. A few cubicles offered moderate privacy, and a bored-looking Moroi

guy was reading a book at a desk but looked ready to fall asleep. There was only one feeder in the room, a scraggly-looking, middle-aged human who sat in a chair with a dopey smile on his face, staring at nothing.

The Moroi flinched when we entered, his eyes going wide. Clearly, we were the most exciting thing to happen to him all night. He didn't have that moment of disorientation when he glanced at us; he apparently had low compulsion resistance, which was good to know.

"What's this?"

"Two new ones just came in," said Wes.

"But we're not due," said the Moroi. "And we never get ones this young. They always give us the old, used-up ones."

"Don't ask me," said Wes, moving toward the door once he'd indicated seats for Lissa and me. It was clear he found escorting feeders beneath him. "Marx wants them here until Sullivan gets up. My guess is it's going to turn out to be a mistake, but they were complaining about needing a fix."

"Wonderful," groaned the Moroi. "Well, our next meal's due in fifteen minutes, so I can give Bradley over there a break. He's so gone, I doubt he'd notice if someone else gave blood instead of him."

Wes nodded. "We'll call down when we've got this straight."

The guardian left, and the Moroi picked up a clipboard with a sigh. I had the feeling everyone here was kind of tired of their jobs. I could understand why. This had to be a miserable place to work. Give me the wider world anytime.

"Who's due to feed in fifteen minutes?" I asked.

The Moroi's head jerked up in astonishment. It wasn't the kind of question a feeder asked. "What did you say?"

Lissa stood up and got him in her gaze. "Answer her question."

The man's face went slack. He *was* easy to compel. "Rudolf Kaiser."

No one either of us recognized. He could have been in here for mass murder or embezzlement for all I knew. "When's Victor Dashkov due?" asked Lissa.

"Two hours."

"Alter the schedule. Tell his guards there's been a readjustment and he has to come now instead of Rudolf."

The Moroi's blank eyes—now as dazed looking as Bradley the feeder's, really—seemed to take a moment to process this. "Yes," he said.

"This is something that might happen normally. It won't raise suspicion."

"It won't raise suspicion," he repeated in a monotone.

"Do it," she ordered, voice hard. "Call them, set it up, and do not take your eyes off of me."

The Moroi complied. While speaking on the phone, he identified himself as Northwood. When he disconnected, the arrangements had been made. We had nothing to do but wait now. My entire body was tightly wound with tension. Theo had said we had over an hour until the warden was on duty. No one would ask questions until then. Eddie simply had to kill time with Theo and not raise suspicions behind a paperwork error. *Calm down, Rose. You can do this.*

While we waited, Lissa compelled Bradley the feeder into a heavy sleep. I didn't want any witnesses, even not drugged ones. Likewise, I turned the

room's camera ever so slightly, so it no longer could see the bulk of the room. Naturally, we'd have to deal with the prison's entire surveillance system before we left, but for now, we needed no watching security personnel to catch sight of what was about to happen.

I had just settled into one of the cubicles when the door opened. Lissa had stayed in her chair near Northwood's desk, so that she could keep her compulsion on him. We'd instructed him that I would be the feeder. I was enclosed, but through Lissa's sight, I saw the group enter: two guardians . . . and Victor Dashkov.

The same distress she'd felt when seeing him at her trial shot up within her. Her heart rate increased. Her hands shook. The only thing that had finally calmed her back at the trial was the resolution of it all, knowing Victor would be locked away forever and unable to hurt her again.

And now we were about to change all that.

Forcibly, Lissa shoved her fear out of her mind so that she could keep her hold on Northwood. The guardians beside Victor were stern and ready for action, though they didn't really need to be. The sickness that had plagued him for years—the one Lissa had temporarily healed him of—was starting to rear its head again. Lack of exercise and fresh air appeared to have taken a toll too, as had the limited blood prisoners were supposedly given. The guards had him clad in shackles as an extra precaution, and the heavy weight dragged him down, almost making him shuffle.

"Over there," said Northwood, pointing at me. "That one."

The guardians led Victor past Lissa, and he barely gave her a second glance. She was working double compulsion: keeping Northwood under her control and using a quick burst to make herself insignificant to Victor when he walked by. The guardians settled him into a chair beside me and then stepped back, still keeping him in sight. One of them struck up conversation with Northwood, noting our newness and youth. If I ever did this again, I'd have Lissa charm us into looking older.

Sitting beside me, Victor leaned toward me and opened his mouth. Feedings were so second nature, the motions always the same, that he hardly had to think about what he did. It was like he didn't even see me.

Except, then . . . he did.

He froze, his eyes going wide. Certain characteristics marked the royal Moroi families, and light, jade-green eyes ran amongst both the Dashkovs and the Dragomirs. The weary, resigned look in his disappeared, and the cunning sharpness that so characterized him—the shrewd intellect I knew well—snapped into place. It reminded me eerily of some of the prisoners we'd passed earlier.

But he was confused. Like the other people we'd encountered, my charm was muddling his thoughts. His senses told him I was a human . . . yet the illusion wasn't perfect. There was also the fact that Victor, as a strong non-spirit compulsion wielder, was relatively resistant to it. And just as Eddie, Lissa, and I had been immune to one another's charms because we knew our true identities, Victor experienced the same effect. His mind might insist that I was human, but his eyes told him I was Rose Hathaway, even with my wig. And once that knowledge was solidified, the human illusion disappeared for

him.

A slow, intrigued smile spread over his face, blatantly displaying his fangs. “Oh my. This might be the best meal I’ve ever had.” His voice was barely audible, covered by the conversation of the others.

“Put your teeth anywhere near me and it’ll be your last meal,” I murmured, voice just as quiet. “But if you want any chance of getting out of here and seeing the world again, you’ll do exactly what I say.”

He gave me a questioning look. I took a deep breath, dreading what I had to say next.

“Attack me.”

SEVEN

"NOT WITH YOUR TEETH," I added hastily. "Throw yourself at me. Swing your shackles. Whatever you can do."

Victor Dashkov was not a stupid man. Others might have hesitated or asked more questions. He did not. He might not know exactly what was going on, but he sensed that this was a shot at freedom. Possibly the only one he'd ever get. He was someone who had spent a large part of his life masterminding complicated plots, so he was a pro at slipping right into them.

Holding his hands up as much as he could manage, he lunged at me, making a good show of trying to choke me with the chain between his cuffs. As he did, I gave a bloodcurdling shriek. In an instant, the guardians were there to stop this crazy prisoner who was senselessly attacking a poor girl. But as they reached to subdue him, I leapt up and attacked *them*. Even if they'd expected me to be dangerous—and they hadn't—I had so much surprise on them that they had no time to react. I *almost* felt bad at how unfair it was to them.

I punched the first hard enough that he lost his grip on Victor and flew backward, hitting the wall near Lissa as she frantically compelled Northwood to stay calm and not call anyone in the midst of this chaos. The other guardian had slightly more time to react, but he was still slow in letting go of Victor and turning on me. I used the opening and got a punch in, forcing the two of us into a grappling match. He was big and formidable, and once he deemed me a threat, he didn't hold back. A blow to my shoulder sent shooting pain through my arm, and I responded with a swift knee in his stomach. Meanwhile, his counterpart was on his feet heading toward us. I had to end this fast, not only for my own sake but also because they would undoubtedly call for backup if given a moment's chance.

I grabbed the one closest to me and pushed him as hard as I could into a wall—headfirst. He staggered, dazed, and I did it again, just as his partner reached me. That first guardian slumped to the ground, unconscious. I hated doing that, but part of my training had been learning to differentiate between incapacitating and killing. He should only have a headache. I hoped. The other guardian was very much on the offensive, however, and he and I circled each other, getting in some shots and dodging others.

"I can't knock him out!" I called to Lissa. "We need him. Compel him."

Her response came through the bond. She could compel two people at the same time, but it took a lot of strength. We weren't out of this yet, and she couldn't risk burning herself out so soon. Frustration replaced fear within her.

"Northwood, go to sleep," she barked. "Right there. On your desk. You're exhausted and will sleep for hours."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Northwood slump, his head hitting the desk with a *thump*. Everyone who worked here would have a concussion by the time we were through. I threw myself at the guardian then, using my full

weight to get him within Lissa's line of sight. She pushed her way into our fight. He glanced at her in surprise, and that was all she needed.

"Stop!"

He didn't respond as quickly as Northwood, but he did hesitate. This guy was more resistant.

"*Stop fighting!*" she repeated more forcefully, intensifying her will.

Strong or not, he couldn't stand against that much spirit. His arms fell to his sides, and he stopped wrestling me. I stepped back to catch my breath, straightening my wig back into place.

"Holding this one's going to be hard," Lissa told me.

"Hard as in five minutes or five hours?"

"Somewhere in the middle."

"Then let's move. Get Victor's key from him."

She demanded the guardian give her the key for the shackles. He told us the other guardian had it. Sure enough, I frisked the unconscious body—he was breathing steadily, thank God—and retrieved the key. Now I turned my full attention on Victor. Once the fight had started, he'd stepped out of the way and simply observed quietly while all sorts of new possibilities undoubtedly formed in his twisted mind.

I approached and put on my "scary face" as I held up the key. "I'm going to unlock your cuffs now," I told him, in a voice both sweet and menacing. "You're going to do exactly what we tell you to do. You're not going to run, start a fight, or in any way interfere with our plans."

"Oh? Are you using compulsion nowadays too, Rose?" he asked dryly.

"I don't need it." I unlocked the shackles. "I can render you unconscious as easily as that guy and drag you out. Makes no difference to me."

The heavy cuffs and chains fell to the floor. That sly, smug look stayed on his face, but his hands gently touched each wrist. I noticed then that there were welts and bruises on them. Those shackles weren't meant for comfort, but I refused to feel sorry for him. He glanced back up at us.

"How charming," he mused. "Out of all the people who would attempt to rescue me, I never would have expected you two . . . and yet, in retrospect, you're probably the most capable."

"We don't need your running commentary, Hannibal," I snapped. "And don't use the word *rescue*. It makes it sound like you're some wrongfully imprisoned hero."

He arched an eyebrow, like he believed that might indeed be the case. Instead of disputing me, he nodded toward Bradley, who had actually slept through the fight. In his drugged state, Lissa's compulsion had been more than enough to knock him out.

"Give him to me," said Victor.

"What?" I exclaimed. "We don't have time for this!"

"And I have no strength for whatever you have in mind," hissed Victor. That pleasant and all-knowing mask vanished, replaced by one vicious and desperate. "Imprisonment involves more than bars, Rose. They starve us of food and blood, trying to keep us weak. Walking here is the only exercise I get, and that's effort enough. Unless you really do plan on dragging me out of here, give me blood!"

Lissa interrupted any response I could make. “Be fast.”

I stared at her in astonishment. I’d been about to deny Victor, but through the bond I felt an odd mix of feelings from her. Compassion and . . . understanding. Oh, she still hated him, absolutely. But she also knew what it was like to live on limited blood.

Mercifully, Victor was fast. His mouth was at the human’s neck practically before Lissa finished speaking. Dazed or no, feeling teeth in his neck was enough to wake Bradley up. He woke with a start, his face soon moving into the delight feeders took from vampire endorphins. A short burst of blood was all Victor would need, but when Bradley’s eyes started to go wide in surprise, I realized Victor was taking more than a quick drink. I leapt forward and jerked Victor away from the scattered feeder.

“What the hell are you doing?” I demanded, shaking Victor hard. It was something I’d wanted to do for a long time. “Did you think you could drain him and become Strigoi right in front of us?”

“Hardly,” said Victor, wincing at the grip I had on him.

“That’s not what he was doing,” said Lissa. “He just lost control for a second.”

His bloodlust satisfied, Victor’s smooth demeanor had returned. “Ah, Vasilisa. Always so understanding.”

“Don’t make any assumptions,” she growled.

I shot glares at both of them. “We have to go. Now.” I turned to the compelled guardian. “Take us to the room where they monitor all security footage.”

He didn’t respond to me, and with a sigh, I looked expectantly at Lissa. She repeated my question, and he immediately began to leave the room. My adrenaline was running high from the fight, and I was anxious to finish all of this and get us out of here. Through the bond, I sensed her nervousness. She might have defended Victor’s need for blood, but as we walked, she kept as far away from him as possible. The stark realization of who he was and what we were doing was creeping up on her. I wished I could comfort her, but there was no time.

We followed the guardian—Lissa asked his name; it was Giovanni—through more halls and security checkpoints. The route he led us on went around the prison’s edge, not through the cells. I held my breath almost the entire time, terrified we’d run into someone. Too many other factors were working against us; we didn’t need that too. Our luck held, though, and we ran into no one—again probably a result of doing this near the end of the night and not passing through a high-security zone.

Lissa and Mia had gotten the Court guardian to erase the security footage there too, but I hadn’t witnessed it. Now, when Giovanni led us into the prison’s surveillance room, I couldn’t help a small gasp. Monitors covered the walls, and consoles with complex buttons and switches sat in front of them. Computer-covered desks were everywhere. I felt like this room had the power to blast off into space. Everything in the prison was in view: each cell, several halls, and even the warden’s office, where Eddie sat making small talk with Theo. Two other guardians were in here, and I wondered if they’d seen us in the halls. But no—they were too fixated on something else: a camera that had

been turned to face a blank wall. It was the one I'd adjusted in the feeding room.

They were leaning toward it, and one of them was saying how they should call someone to check down there. Then they both looked up and noticed us.

"Help her subdue them," Lissa ordered Giovanni.

Again, there was hesitation. We would have been better off with a "helper" with a weaker will, but Lissa had had no idea when she chose him. Like before, he eventually sprang into action. Also like before, surprise went a long way in subduing these two guardians. I was a stranger—immediately raising their guard—but still appeared as human. Giovanni was their coworker; they didn't expect an attack from him.

That didn't make them easy to take down, though. Having backup went a long way, and Giovanni was good at his job. We rendered one guardian unconscious pretty quickly, Giovanni using a choke hold to briefly cut off the guy's air until he collapsed. The other guard kept his distance from us, and I noticed his eyes continually shifting toward one of the walls. It had a fire extinguisher, a light switch, and a round silver button.

"That's an alarm!" exclaimed Victor, just as the guardian lunged for it.

Giovanni and I tackled him at the same time, stopping the guy just before his hand could brush the button and send a legion of guards down on us. A blow to the head knocked this guardian out too. With each person I took out in this prison break, a knot of guilt and nausea twisted tighter and tighter in my stomach. Guardians were the good guys, and I couldn't help but keep thinking I was fighting on the side of evil.

Now that we were left to ourselves, Lissa knew the next step. "Giovanni, disable all the cameras and erase the last hour's worth of footage."

There was a greater hesitation on his part this time. Getting him to fight his friends had required a lot of forceful compulsion on her part. She was keeping her control but growing weary, and it was only going to get harder making him obey our commands.

"Do it," growled Victor, coming to stand beside Lissa. She flinched at his proximity, but as his gaze joined hers, Giovanni complied with the order and began flipping switches on the consoles. Victor couldn't match Lissa's power by a long shot, but his small burst of compulsion had strengthened hers.

One by one, the monitors went black, and then Giovanni typed in a few commands on the computer that stored digital footage from the cameras. Red error lights were flashing on the consoles, but there was no one here now to fix them.

"Even if he erases it, there are those who might be able to recover it from the hard drive," noted Victor.

"It's a chance we'll have to take," I said irritably. "Reprogramming or whatever isn't really in my skill set."

Victor rolled his eyes. "Perhaps, but destruction certainly is."

It took me a moment to get what he meant, but then it clicked. With a sigh, I grabbed the fire extinguisher from the wall and beat the computer to a pulp until it was nothing more than a pile of plastic and metal fragments. Lissa winced at each blow and kept glancing at the door.

"I hope that's soundproof," she muttered.

"It looks sturdy," I said confidently. "And now it's time to go."

Lissa ordered Giovanni to return us to the warden's office at the front of the prison. He complied, leading us back through the maze we'd gone through earlier. His codes and security card got us through each checkpoint.

"I don't suppose you can compel Theo into letting us walk out?" I asked Lissa.

Her mouth was set in a grim line. She shook her head. "I don't even know how much longer I can hold Giovanni. I've never used someone as a puppet before."

"It's okay," I said, trying to reassure both of us. "We're almost done with this."

But we were going to have another fight on our hands. After beating up half the Strigoi in Russia, I still felt good about my own strength, but that guilty feeling wouldn't leave me. And if we ran into a dozen guardians, even my strength wasn't going to hold.

I'd lost my bearings from the blueprint, but it turned out that Giovanni's route back to the main office was taking us through a block of cells after all. Another sign read overhead WARNING—NOW ENTERING PRISONER AREA (PSYCHIATRIC).

"Psychiatric?" I asked in surprise.

"Of course," murmured Victor. "Where else do you think they send prisoners with mental problems?"

"To hospitals," I responded, holding back a joke about all criminals having mental problems.

"Well, that's not always—"

"Stop!"

Lissa interrupted him and came to an abrupt halt before the door. The rest of us nearly walked into her. She jerked away, taking several steps back.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

She turned to Giovanni. "Find another way to the office."

"This is the fastest way," he argued.

Lissa slowly shook her head. "I don't care. Find another, one where we won't run into others."

He frowned, but her compulsion held. He abruptly turned, and we scurried to keep up. "What's wrong?" I repeated. Lissa's mind was too tangled for me to pull out her reasoning. She grimaced.

"I felt spirit auras behind there."

"*What?* How many?"

"At least two. I don't know if they sensed me or not."

If not for Giovanni's clip and the urgency pressing on us, I would have come to a stop. "Spirit users . . ."

Lissa had looked so long and hard for others like her. Who'd have thought we'd find them here? Actually . . . maybe we should have expected this. We knew spirit users danced with insanity. Why wouldn't they end up in a place like this? And considering the trouble we'd gone through to learn about the prison, it was no wonder these spirit users had remained hidden. I doubted anyone working here even knew what they were.

Lissa and I exchanged brief glances. I knew how badly she wanted to

investigate this, but now wasn't the time. Victor already looked too interested in what we'd said, so Lissa's next words were in my head: *I'm pretty sure any spirit users would see through my charms. We can't risk our real descriptions being discovered—even if they came from people who are allegedly crazy.*

I nodded my understanding, pushing aside curiosity and even regret. We'd have to check into this another time—say, like, the next time we decided to break into a maximum-security prison.

We finally reached Theo's office without further incident, though my heart pounded furiously the entire way as my brain kept telling me, *Go! Go! Go!* Theo and Eddie were chatting Court politics when our group entered. Eddie immediately leapt up and went for Theo, recognizing it was time to go. He had Theo in a choke hold as efficiently as Giovanni had managed earlier, and I was glad someone else was doing this dirty work besides me. Unfortunately, Theo managed a good yelp before passing out and falling to the ground.

Immediately, the two guardians who had escorted us in earlier charged the office. Eddie and I jumped into the fray, and Lissa and Victor got Giovanni in on it too. To make things more difficult, just after we subdued one of the guardians, Giovanni broke out of the compulsion and began fighting *against* us. Worse, he ran to the wall where I discovered—too late—there was another silver alarm button. He slammed his fist against it, and a piercing wail filled the air.

"Shit!" I yelled.

Lissa's skills weren't in physical fighting, and Victor wasn't much better. It was all on me and Eddie to finish these last two—and we had to do it *fast*. The second of the escort guardians went down, and then it was just us and Giovanni. He got a good hit in on me—one that knocked my head against the wall. It wasn't good enough to make me pass out, but the world spun and black and white spots danced before my eyes. It froze me up for a moment, but then Eddie was on him, and Giovanni was soon no longer a threat.

Eddie took my arm to steady me, and then the four of us immediately ran out of the room. I glanced back at the unconscious bodies, again hating myself for it. There was no time for guilt, though. We had to get out. Now. Every guardian in this prison would be here in less than a minute.

Our group ran to the front doors, only to discover them locked from the inside. Eddie swore and told us to wait. He ran back to Theo's office and returned with one of the security cards that Giovanni had often swiped at the doors. Sure enough, this one let us out, and we made a mad dash for the rental car. We piled in, and I was glad Victor kept up with all of us and made none of his annoying comments.

Eddie stepped on the gas and headed back toward the way we'd come in. I sat beside him in the front. "I guarantee the gate guy's going to know about the alarm," I warned. Our original hope had been to simply leave and tell him there'd been a paperwork mix-up after all.

"Yup," Eddie agreed, face hard. Sure enough, the guardian stepped out of his gatehouse, arms waving.

"Is that a gun?" I exclaimed.

"I'm not stopping to find out." Eddie pushed hard on the gas, and when the guardian realized we were coming through regardless, he jumped out of the

way. We crashed through the wooden arm that blocked the road, leaving it a mess of splinters.

"Bud's gonna keep our deposit," I said.

Behind us, I heard the sounds of gunshots. Eddie swore again, but as we sped away, the shots grew fainter, and soon, we were out of range. He exhaled. "If those had hit our tires or windows, we'd have had a lot more to worry about than a deposit."

"They're going to send people after us," said Victor from the backseat. Once again, Lissa had moved as far from him as she could. "Trucks are probably leaving right now."

"You don't think we guessed that?" I snapped. I knew he was trying to be helpful, but he was the last person I wanted to hear from at the moment. Even as I spoke, I peered back and saw the dark shapes of two vehicles speeding down the road after us. They were gaining quickly, leaving no question that the SUVs would soon catch up to our little compact car.

I looked at our GPS. "We need to turn soon," I warned Eddie, not that he needed my advice.

We'd mapped out an escape route beforehand, one that took lots and lots of twisty turns on these remote back roads. Fortunately, there were a lot of them. Eddie made a hard left and then almost an immediate right. Still, the pursuing vehicles stayed with us in the rearview mirror. It wasn't until a few turns later that the road behind us stayed clear.

Tense silence filled the car as we waited for the guardians to catch up. They didn't. We'd made too many confusing turns, but it took nearly ten minutes for me to accept that we might have actually pulled this off.

"I think we lost them," said Eddie, the wonder in his voice matching my feelings. His face was still lined with worry, his hands gripping the wheel hard.

"We won't lose them until we clear Fairbanks," I said. "I'm sure they'll search it, and it's not that big."

"Where are we going?" asked Victor. "If I'm allowed to ask."

I squirmed around in my seat so that I could look him in the eye. "That's what you're going to tell us. As hard as it is to believe, we didn't do all that just because we missed your pleasant company."

"That *is* hard to believe."

I narrowed my eyes. "We want to find your brother. Robert Doru."

I had the satisfaction of momentarily catching Victor off guard. Then his sly look returned. "Of course. This is a follow-up to Abe Mazur's request, isn't it? I should have known he wouldn't take no for an answer. Of course, I never would have guessed you were in league with him."

Victor apparently didn't know I was actually in the familial league with Abe, and I wasn't about to enlighten him. "Irrelevant," I said coldly. "Now, you're going to take us to Robert. Where is he?"

"You forget, Rose," mused Victor. "You aren't the one with compulsion here."

"No, but I am the one who can tie you up by the side of the road and make an anonymous call back to the prison with your whereabouts."

"How do I know you won't get what you want from me and then turn me

back in anyway?" he asked. "I have no reason to trust you."

"You're right. I sure as hell wouldn't trust me. But if things work out, there's a chance we might let you go afterward." No, there really wasn't. "Is this something you want to gamble on? You'll never get another opportunity like this, and you know it."

Victor had no witty quip for that. Score another one for me.

"So," I continued, "are you going to take us to him or not?"

Thoughts I couldn't read churned behind his eyes. No doubt he was scheming about how he could work this to his advantage, probably figuring out how to escape us before we even reached Robert. It was what I would have done.

"Las Vegas," Victor said at last. "We need to go to Las Vegas."

EIGHT

AFTER THE BITCHING I'D DONE to Abe about always going to remote crappy places, I should have been excited about the prospect of going to Sin City. Alas, I had a few reservations about my next epic trip. First of all, somewhere like Las Vegas was the *last* place I would expect a semi-crazy recluse to be. From the bits and pieces I'd heard, Robert had dropped off the radar and wanted to be alone. A busy, tourist-filled city didn't really fit that description. Second, cities like that were perfect feeding grounds for Strigoi. Crowded. Reckless. Low inhibitions. Very easy for people to disappear—especially when most of them were out at night.

Part of me was certain it had to be a trick on Victor's part, but he swore up and down that it was true. So, with no other leads, Las Vegas became our next destination. We didn't have much time to debate the matter anyway, knowing the guardians would be searching Fairbanks for us. Admittedly, Lissa's charms had altered our appearances enough that they wouldn't be looking for people with our descriptions. They knew what Victor looked like, though, so the sooner we were out of Alaska, the better.

Unfortunately, we had a slight problem.

"Victor has no ID," said Eddie. "We can't take him on a plane."

It was true. All of Victor's possessions had been seized by prison authorities, and in the midst of disabling surveillance and taking out half a dozen guardians, we'd hardly had time to go searching for his personal stuff. Lissa's compulsion was phenomenal, but she was exhausted after wielding so much at the prison. Besides, guardians would likely be watching the airport.

Our "friend" Bud the car rental guy provided the solution. He hadn't been thrilled to see his car returned with all the scratches from Eddie's daredevil driving, but enough cash had finally stopped the human's muttering about "renting to a bunch of kids." It was Victor who thought of an alternative plan and suggested it to Bud.

"Is there a private airport nearby? With flights we might charter?"

"Sure," said Bud. "But it won't be cheap."

"It's not an issue," I said.

Bud eyed us askance. "Did you guys rob a bank or something?"

No, but we were packing a lot of currency. Lissa had a trust fund that doled her out monthly money until she was eighteen, as well as a high-limit credit card. I had a credit card of my own, leftover from when I'd sweet-talked Adrian into funding my Russian trip. I'd let go of the rest of my assets, like the huge bank account he'd set up. But, wrong or not, I'd decided to keep one card on hand, just in case of emergency.

This was certainly an emergency, so we used the card to pay for part of the private plane's cost. The pilot couldn't take us as far as Las Vegas, but he could take us to Seattle, where he was able to connect us with another pilot he

knew who could go the rest of the way. More money.

"And Seattle again," I mused, just before the plane took off. The little jet's interior had a set of four seats, two on each side facing each other. I sat next to Victor, and Eddie sat across from him. We figured that was the best protective configuration.

"What about Seattle?" asked Eddie, puzzled.

"Never mind."

Little private jets aren't nearly as fast as big commercial ones, and our trip took a large part of the day. During it, I continued asking Victor about his brother's role in Las Vegas and finally got the answer I wanted. Victor would have had to tell us eventually, but I think he'd gotten a sadistic thrill out of prolonging the answer.

"Robert doesn't live in Las Vegas proper," he explained. "He has a small house—a cabin, I suppose—out by Red Rock Canyon, miles outside the city."

Ah. Now *that* was more what I'd expected. Lissa stiffened at the mention of a cabin, and I felt unease through the bond. When Victor had kidnapped her, he'd taken her to a cabin in the woods and tortured her there. I gave her as reassuring a look as I could. It was times like these I wished the bond worked both ways so that I could truly send her comfort.

"So we'll go out there?"

Victor snorted. "Certainly not. Robert values his privacy too much. He wouldn't let strangers come to his home. But he'll come to the city if I ask."

Lissa eyed me. *Victor could be setting us up. He had lots of supporters. Now that he's out, he could call them instead of Robert to meet us.*

I gave her a tiny nod, again wishing I could respond back through the bond. I'd thought of this as well. It was imperative we never leave Victor alone to make unsupervised calls. And actually, this plan to meet in Las Vegas itself made me feel better. For our own safety from Victor's henchmen, it was better to be in the city than out in the middle of nowhere.

"Seeing as I've been so helpful," said Victor, "I have the right to know what you want with my brother." He glanced at Lissa. "Looking for spirit lessons? You had to have done some excellent investigative work to find out about him."

"You have no right to know about our plans," I retorted sharply. "And seriously? If you're keeping track of who's been the most helpful here, we are *totally* beating you on the score-card. You've got a ways to go to catch up after what we did at Tarasov."

Victor's only response was a small smile.

Some of our flight time took place at night, which meant it was early morning when we landed in Las Vegas. The safety of sunlight. I was surprised to see how crowded the airport was. The private one in Seattle had had a fair amount of planes, but the Fairbanks airport had nearly been deserted. This strip was chock-full of little jets, many of them screaming "luxury." I shouldn't have been surprised. Las Vegas was the playground of celebrities and other wealthy people, many of whom probably couldn't lower themselves to fly commercial with ordinary passengers.

There were taxis there, sparing us the ordeal of another rental car. But when the driver asked us where we were going, we all stayed silent. I turned to

Victor.

"The middle of the city, right? The Strip?"

"Yes," he agreed. He'd been certain Robert would want to meet strangers somewhere very public. Somewhere he could easily flee.

"The Strip's a big place," said the driver. "You got any place in particular or should I just drop you off in the middle of the street?"

Silence fell over us. Lissa shot me a meaningful look. "The Witching Hour?"

I considered it. Las Vegas was a favorite place for some Moroi. The bright sun made it less appealing for Strigoi, and the windowless casinos created comfortable, dark atmospheres. The Witching Hour was a hotel and casino we'd all heard of. While it had plenty of human customers, it was actually owned by Moroi, so it had lots of clandestine features to make it a great getaway for vampires. Feeders in back rooms. Special Moroi-only lounges. A fair number of guardians on patrol.

Guardians . . .

I shook my head and glanced sideways at Victor. "We can't take him there." Of all the hotels in Las Vegas, the Witching Hour was the last we'd want to go to. Victor's escape had to be breaking news all over the Moroi world. Taking him into Vegas's largest concentration of Moroi and guardians was probably the worst thing we could do at this point.

In the rearview mirror, the driver's face looked impatient. It was Eddie who finally piped up. "The Luxor."

He and I were in the backseat, with Victor between us, and I peered over. "Where did that come from?"

"It puts distance between us and the Witching Hour." Eddie suddenly looked a little sheepish. "And I've always wanted to stay there. I mean, if you're coming to Vegas, why not stay in a pyramid?"

"You can't fault that logic," said Lissa.

"The Luxor it is," I said to the driver.

We rode in silence, all of us—well, except for Victor—staring at the sights in awe. Even in the daytime, the streets of Las Vegas were teeming with people. The young and glamorous walked side by side with older couples from Middle America, who'd probably saved and saved to make this trip. The hotels and casinos we passed were huge, flashy, and inviting.

And when we reached the Luxor . . . yup. It was just like Eddie had said. A hotel shaped like a pyramid. I stared up at it when we got out of the car, trying hard not to let my jaw drop like the starry-eyed tourist I was. I paid the driver and we headed inside. I didn't know how long we'd be staying, but we definitely needed a room as our base of operation.

Stepping into the hotel was like being back in the night-clubs in Saint Petersburg and Novosibirsk. Flashing lights and the overwhelming scent of smoke. And noise. Noise, noise, noise. The slot machines beeped and rang, chips fell, people yelled in dismay or delight, and the low thrum of conversation filled the room like humming bees. I grimaced. The stimuli grated on my senses.

We passed through the casino's edge to get to the front desk, where the attendant didn't even blink at three teenagers and an old man getting a room together. I had to imagine that around here, they saw it all. Our room was

average-size, with two double beds, and somehow we'd lucked out with an amazing view. Lissa stood at the window, entranced by the sights of people and cars on the Strip below, but I jumped straight to business.

"Okay, call him," I ordered Victor. He'd settled down on one of the beds, hands crossed and expression serene, as though he truly were on vacation. Despite that smug smile, I could see the fatigue etched on his face. Even with his blood refill, the escape and long trip had been exhausting, and the effects of his slowly returning disease were naturally taking a toll on his physical strength.

Victor immediately reached for the hotel's phone, but I shook my head. "Liss, let him use your cell. I want a record of this number."

She gingerly handed the phone over, as though he might contaminate it. He took it and gave me a nigh-angelic look. "I don't suppose I could have some privacy? It's been so long since Robert and I have talked."

"No," I snapped. The harshness in my voice startled even me, and it occurred to me Lissa wasn't the only one suffering from all the spirit used today.

Victor gave a small shrug and began dialing. He'd told us on one of the flights that he had Robert's number memorized, and I had to take it on faith that that was who he was calling. I also had to hope Robert's number hadn't changed. Of course, even if Victor hadn't seen his brother in years, Victor had only been imprisoned a short while and had probably kept tabs on Robert beforehand.

Tension filled the room as we waited while the phone rang. A moment later, I heard a voice answer through the phone's speaker—though I couldn't make out the exact words.

"Robert," said Victor pleasantly, "it's Victor."

This received a frantic response on the other end. I only could hear half of the conversation, but it was intriguing. Victor first had to spend a lot of time convincing Robert that he was out of prison. Apparently, Robert wasn't so removed from Moroi society that he was out of touch with current news. Victor told him that the details would be revealed later and then began making his pitch for Robert to come meet us.

It took a long time. I got the feeling that Robert lived in fear and paranoia, which reminded me of Ms. Karp when she'd been in the advanced stages of spirit's insanity. Lissa's gaze stayed fixed on the scene outside the window during the entire call, but her feelings mirrored mine: fear that this could someday be her fate. Or mine as well, if I siphoned away spirit's effects. The image of the Tarasov sign flashed briefly through her mind: *WARNING—NOW ENTERING PRISONER AREA (PSYCHIATRIC)*.

Victor's voice turned surprisingly cajoling as he spoke to his brother, gentle even. I was reminded uneasily of the old days, before we'd known about Victor's demented plans for Moroi domination. Back then, he'd treated us kindly too and had practically been a member of Lissa's family. I wondered if at some point he'd been sincere or if it had all been an act.

Finally, after almost twenty minutes, Victor convinced Robert to come see us. The unintelligible words on the other end of the phone were filled with anxiety, and at this point, I felt convinced that Victor truly was talking to his

crazy brother and not one of his accomplices. Victor set up a dinner meeting at one of the hotel's restaurants and at last disconnected.

"Dinner?" I asked when Victor set the phone down. "Isn't he worried about being out after dark?"

"It's an early dinner," Victor replied. "Four thirty. And the sun won't go down until almost eight."

"Four thirty?" I asked. "Good God. Are we getting the senior citizen special?"

But he made a good point about the time and sun. Without the safety of Alaska's nearly nonstop summer light, I was starting to feel suffocated by the pressure of sunrise and sunset boundaries, even though it was summer here. Unfortunately, a safe early dinner still meant we had hours to pass.

Victor leaned back on the bed, arms behind his head. I think he was attempting an unconcerned air, but my guess was that it was actually exhaustion driving him to seek the bed's comfort.

"Care to try your luck downstairs?" He glanced over at Lissa. "Spirit users make remarkably good card players. I don't have to tell you how good you are at reading people." She made no response.

"Nobody's leaving this room," I said. I didn't like the idea of us all being cooped up here, but I couldn't risk an escape attempt or Strigoi lurking in the casino's dark corners.

After showering the dye from her hair, Lissa pulled up a chair by the window. She refused to get any closer to Victor. I sat cross-legged on the second bed, where there was plenty of room for Eddie to sit too, but he remained upright against a wall, in perfect guardian posture as he watched Victor. I had no doubt Eddie could maintain that position for hours, no matter how uncomfortable it got. We'd all been trained to endure harsh conditions. He did a good job at looking stern, but every once in a while, I'd catch him studying Victor curiously. Eddie had stood by me in this act of treason but still didn't know why I'd done it.

We'd been there a few hours when someone knocked at the door. I leapt up.

Eddie and I mirrored each other, both of us straightening to rigid attention, hands going for our stakes. We'd ordered lunch an hour ago, but room service had long since come and gone. It was too early for Robert, and besides, he didn't know the name our room was under. There was no nausea, though. No Strigoi at our door. I met Eddie's gaze, silent messages passing between us on what to do.

But it was Lissa who acted first, rising from her chair and taking a few steps across the room. "It's Adrian."

"What?" I exclaimed. "Are you sure?"

She nodded. Spirit users usually only saw auras, but they could sense each other if they were close enough—just as she had at the prison. Still, none of us moved. She gave me a dry look.

"He knows I'm here," she pointed out. "He can feel me too."

I sighed, still keeping my hand on my stake, and strode to the door. I squinted through the peephole. Standing there, his expression amused and restless, was Adrian. I could see no one else, and with no indication of Strigoi to be found, I finally opened the door. His face lit with joy when he saw me.

Leaning in, he gave me a quick kiss on the cheek before stepping into the room.

"You guys didn't really think you could go off on a party weekend without me, did you? Especially *here* of all places—"

He froze, and it was one of those rare moments when Adrian Ivashkov was caught totally and completely off guard.

"Did you know," he said slowly, "that Victor Dashkov is sitting on your bed?"

"Yeah," I said. "It was kind of a shock to us too."

Adrian dragged his gaze from Victor and glanced around the room, noticing Eddie for the first time. Eddie had been standing so still that he practically seemed like part of the furniture. Adrian turned to me.

"What the *hell* is going on? Everyone is out looking for him!"

Lissa's words spoke to me through my bond. *You might as well tell him. You know he won't leave now.*

She was right. I didn't know how Adrian had found us, but now that he had, there was no way he'd go. I glanced hesitantly at Eddie, who guessed my thoughts.

"We'll be fine," he said. "Go talk. I won't let anything happen."

And I'm strong enough again that I can compel him if he tries anything, Lissa added.

I sighed. "Okay. We'll be right back."

I took Adrian's arm and led him outside. As soon as we were in the hallway, he started in again. "Rose, what's—"

I shook my head. In our time here, I'd heard enough noise from other hotel guests in the hall to know that my friends would hear our conversation if we talked out there. Instead, Adrian and I took the elevator and headed downstairs, where the noise of the casino would mask our words. We found a slightly out-of-the-way corner, and Adrian practically pushed me against the wall, his expression dark. His light attitude annoyed me sometimes, but I preferred it to when he was upset, largely because I feared spirit would add an unstable edge.

"You leave me a note saying you're sneaking off for one last party weekend, and instead I find you holed up with one of the most notorious criminals ever? When I left Court, that's all everyone was talking about! Didn't that guy try to kill you?"

I answered his question with a question. "How did you even find us?"

"The credit card," he said. "I was waiting for you to use it."

My eyes widened. "You promised me when I got all those that you wouldn't go snooping!" Since my accounts and cards had come with his help, I'd known he had access to the records but had believed him when he'd said he'd respect my privacy.

"When you were in Russia, I kept that promise. This is different. I kept checking and checking with the company, and as soon as the activity with the charter plane showed up, I called and found out where you were going." Adrian's arrival here so soon after ours wasn't that unbelievable if he had been monitoring the card. Once he'd had the information he needed, he could have easily booked a flight. A nonstop commercial jet would have made up the time

on our slower, multistop trip. “There was no way I could resist Vegas,” he continued. “So I thought I’d surprise you and show up to join in the fun.” I’d used my card for the room, I realized, again tipping off our location. No one else was linked to my or Lissa’s cards, but the ease with which he’d tracked us made me nervous.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” I growled. “We might be together, but there are boundaries you’ve got to respect. This is none of your business.”

“It’s not like I was reading your diary! I just wanted to find my girlfriend and—” It was a sign of Adrian’s distress that his mind was only now beginning to backtrack and put pieces together. “Oh lord. Rose, please tell me you guys aren’t the ones who busted him out? They’re all looking for two human girls and a dhampir guy. The descriptions don’t match at all . . .” He groaned. “But it *was* you, wasn’t it? Somehow, you broke into a maximum-security prison. With Eddie.”

“Must not have been all that secure,” I remarked lightly.

“Rose! This guy has fucked with both of your lives. Why would you free him?”

“Because . . .” I hesitated. How could I explain this to Adrian? How could I explain that which, by all evidence in our world, was impossible? And how could I explain what goal in particular was driving this? “Victor has information we need. Or, well, he has access to someone we need. This was the only way we could get it.”

“What on earth could he possibly know to make you do all this?”

I swallowed. I walked into prisons and nests of Strigoi, but saying what I did next to Adrian filled me with apprehension. “Because there might be a way to save Strigoi. To turn them back to the way they were. And Victor . . . Victor knows someone who might have done this.”

Adrian stared at me for several long seconds, and even in the midst of the casino’s movement and noise, it was like the world grew still and silent.

“Rose, that’s impossible.”

“It might not be.”

“If there was a way to do that, we would know.”

“It involves spirit users. And we only just found out about them.”

“That doesn’t mean it’s—oh. I see.” His deep green eyes flashed, and this time, they were angry. “It’s him, isn’t it? This is your last crazy attempt to get to him. To Dimitri.”

“Not just him,” I said vaguely. “It could save all Strigoi.”

“I thought this was over!” Adrian exclaimed. His voice was loud enough that a few people at nearby slot machines glanced over. “You told me it was over. You told me you could move on and be with me.”

“I meant it,” I said, surprised at the desperate note in my voice. “It’s something we only just found out about. We had to try.”

“And what then? What if this stupid fantasy works? You free Dimitri in some miraculous act, and you drop me like *that*.” He snapped his fingers.

“I don’t know,” I said wearily. “We’re just taking this one step at a time. I love being with you. Really. But I can’t ignore this.”

“Of course you can’t.” He turned his eyes heavenward. “Dreams, dreams. I walk them; I live them. I delude myself with them. It’s a wonder I can spot

reality anymore." The weird sound of his voice made me nervous. I could recognize one of his slightly crazy, spirit-induced lapses. Then, he turned from me with a sigh. "I need a drink."

Whatever pity I'd felt for him turned to anger. "Oh, good. That'll fix everything. I'm glad in a world gone mad, you've still got your old standbys."

I flinched at his glare. He didn't do it very often, and when he did, it was a powerful thing. "What do you expect me to do?" he asked.

"You could . . . you could . . ." Oh God. "Well, now that you're here, you could help us. Plus, this guy we're meeting. He's another spirit user."

Adrian didn't betray his thoughts, but I had a feeling that I had piqued his interest. "Yeah, that's exactly what I want. To help my girlfriend get her old boyfriend back." He turned away again, and I heard him mutter, "I need *two* drinks."

"Four thirty," I called after him. "We're meeting at four thirty."

There was no response, and Adrian melted into the crowd.

I returned to the room in a dark cloud that had to be obvious to everyone. Lissa and Eddie were smart enough not to ask questions, but Victor, of course, had no such reserves.

"What? Mr. Ivashkov isn't joining us? I'd so been looking forward to his company."

"Shut up," I said, crossing my arms and leaning against the wall near Eddie. "Don't speak unless you're spoken to."

The next couple hours dragged by. I was convinced that any minute, Adrian would come back and reluctantly agree to help us. We could use his compulsion if things went bad, even though he couldn't match Lissa. Surely . . . surely he loved me enough to come to my aid? He wouldn't abandon me? *You're an idiot, Rose.* It was my own voice that chastised me in my head, not Lissa's. *You've given him no reason to help. You just hurt him again and again. Just like you did Mason.*

When four fifteen came around, Eddie looked over at me. "Should we stake out a table?"

"Yeah." I was restless and upset. I didn't want to stay in this room any longer, trapped with dark feelings that wouldn't go away. Victor rose from the bed, stretching as though getting up from a relaxing nap. Still, I could have sworn there was an eager glint hidden in the depths of his eyes. By all accounts, he and his half-brother were close, though I'd seen no indication that Victor displayed love or loyalty to anyone. Who knew? Maybe somewhere there was true affection for Robert.

We formed a sort of protective configuration with me in the front, Eddie in the back, and the two Moroi between us. I opened the room's door and came face-to-face with Adrian. His hand was raised as though he'd been about to knock. He arched an eyebrow.

"Oh, hey," he said. He had the standard laid-back Adrian expression on his face, though his voice was a bit strained. I knew he wasn't happy about any of this. I could see it in the tight set of his jaw and agitation in his eyes. Nonetheless, he was putting on a good front for the others, for which I was grateful. Most importantly, he'd come back. That was what mattered, and I could ignore the scent of alcohol and smoke wreathing him. "So . . . I hear

there's some party going on. Mind if I join you?"

I gave him a weak, grateful smile. "Come on."

Our group now up to five, we headed down the hall toward the elevator. "I was cleaning up at poker, you know," Adrian added. "So this better be good."

"I don't know if it'll be good," I mused. The elevator doors opened. "But I think it'll be memorable."

We stepped inside, off to see Robert Doru. And what might be Dimitri's only salvation.

NINE

ROBERT DORU WAS EASY TO SPOT. It wasn't because he looked like Victor. It wasn't even because of any dramatic running-toward-each-other reunion type thing between him and his brother. Rather, it was Lissa's mind that tipped me off. I saw Robert through her eyes, the golden aura of a spirit user lighting up his corner of the restaurant like a star. It caught her by surprise, and she stumbled briefly. Spirit users were too rare a sight for her to be fully used to them. Seeing auras was something she could tune in or out, and just before "turning his off," she noted that even though his had the brilliant gold she saw in Adrian, there was also a feel of instability to it. Sparks of other colors flashed there too, but they trembled and flickered. She wondered if it was a mark of spirit's insanity setting in.

His eyes lit up as Victor approached the table, but the two didn't hug or touch. Victor simply sat down beside his brother. The rest of us stood there awkwardly for a moment. The whole situation was too weird. But it was the reason we'd come, and after several more seconds, my friends and I joined the brothers at the table.

"Victor . . ." breathed Robert, eyes wide. Robert might have had some of the Dashkov facial features, but his eyes were brown, not green. His hands toyed with a napkin. "I can't believe it. . . . I've wanted to see you for so long. . . ."

Victor's voice was gentle, as it had been on the phone, as if he were talking to a child. "I know, Robert. I missed you too."

"Are you staying? Can you come back and stay with me?" Part of me wanted to snap that that was a ridiculous idea, but the desperation in Robert's voice sparked a tiny bit of pity in me. I remained silent, simply watching the drama before me unfold. "I'd hide you. It'd be great. Just the two of us."

Victor hesitated. He wasn't stupid. Despite my vague claims on the plane, he knew the odds of me letting him go were nonexistent. "I don't know," he said quietly. "I don't know."

The waiter's arrival jolted us out of our haze, and we all ordered drinks. Adrian ordered a gin and tonic and wasn't even carded. I wasn't sure if it was because he looked twenty-one or was convincing enough with spirit. Regardless, I wasn't thrilled about it. Alcohol muted spirit. We were in a precarious situation, and I would have liked him at full strength. Of course, considering he'd been drinking earlier, it probably didn't matter now.

After the waiter left, Robert seemed to notice the rest of us. His eyes passed over Eddie quickly, sharpened at Lissa and Adrian, and lingered on me for a long time. I stiffened, not liking the scrutiny. He finally turned back to his brother.

"Who have you brought, Victor?" Robert still had that oblivious, scattered air to him but it was lit with suspicion now. Fear and paranoia. "Who are

these children? Two spirit users and . . .” His gaze fell on me again. He was reading my aura. “One of the shadow-kissed?”

For a moment, I was astonished at his use of the term. Then I remembered what Mark, Oksana’s husband, had told me. Robert had once been bonded to a dhampir—and that dhampir had died, drastically speeding up the deterioration of Robert’s mind.

“They’re friends,” said Victor smoothly. “Friends who’d like to talk to you and ask you some questions.”

Robert frowned. “You’re lying. I can tell. And they don’t consider you a friend. They’re tense. They keep their distance from you.”

Victor didn’t deny the friend claim. “Nonetheless, they need your help, and I promised it to them. It was the price for me being allowed to visit you.”

“You shouldn’t have made promises for me.” Robert’s napkin was now in shreds. I kind of wanted to give him mine.

“But didn’t you want to see me?” asked Victor winningly. His tone was warm, his smile *almost* genuine.

Robert looked troubled. Confused. I was again reminded of a child and was starting to have my doubts that this guy had ever transformed a Strigoi.

He was spared an answer yet again when our drinks arrived. None of us had even picked up our menus, much to the waiter’s obvious annoyance. He left, and I opened mine without really seeing it.

Victor then introduced us to Robert, as formally as he might at any diplomatic function. Prison hadn’t dulled his sense of royal etiquette. Victor gave first names only. Robert turned back to me, that frown still on his face, and glanced between Lissa and me. Adrian had said that whenever we were together, our auras showed that we were linked.

“A bond . . . I’ve almost forgotten what it was like . . . but Alden. I’ve never forgotten Alden . . .” His eyes grew dreamy and almost vacant. He was reliving a memory.

“I’m sorry,” I said, surprised to hear the sympathy in my words. This was hardly the harsh interrogation I’d envisioned. “I can only imagine what it must have been like . . . losing him. . . .”

The dreamy eyes grew sharp and hard. “No. You cannot. It’s like nothing you can imagine. *Nothing*. Right now . . . right now . . . you have the world. A universe of senses beyond those of others, an understanding of another person that no one can have. To lose that . . . to have that ripped away . . . it would make you wish for death.”

Wow. Robert was pretty good at killing conversation, and we all kind of sat there hoping the waiter would return this time. When he did, we all made halfhearted attempts at ordering food—except Robert—most of us deciding on the spot. The restaurant served Asian cuisine, and I ordered the first thing I saw on the menu: an egg roll sampler.

With food ordered, Victor continued taking the firm hand with Robert that I seemed incapable of managing.

“Will you help them? Will you answer their questions?”

I had a feeling that Victor was pushing Robert on this not so much as a way to pay back us rescuing him, but rather because Victor’s scheming nature was dying to know everyone’s secrets and motivations.

Robert sighed. Whenever he looked at Victor, there was such a strong expression of devotion and even idol worship. Robert probably couldn't refuse his brother anything. He was the perfect type to play into Victor's plans, and I realized I should possibly be grateful that Robert had grown unstable. If he'd been in full control of his powers, Victor would never have bothered with Lissa last time. He would have already had his own private spirit wielder to use however he wanted.

"What do you want to know?" asked Robert blearily. He addressed me, apparently recognizing my leadership.

I glanced at my friends for moral support and received none. Neither Lissa nor Adrian approved of this mission in the first place, and Eddie still didn't know its purpose. I swallowed, steeling myself, and directed my full attention to Robert.

"We heard you freed a Strigoi once. That you were able to convert him—or her—back to their original state."

Surprise flashed on Victor's usually composed face. He certainly hadn't expected this.

"Where did you hear this?" demanded Robert.

"From a couple I met in Russia. Their names are Mark and Oksana."

"Mark and Oksana . . ." Again, Robert's gaze slipped away for a moment. I had a feeling this happened a lot, that he didn't spend much time in reality. "I didn't know they were still together."

"They are. They're doing really great." I needed him back in the present. "Is it true? Did you do what they said? Is it possible?"

Robert's responses were always preceded by a pause. "Her."

"Huh?"

"It was a woman. I freed her."

I gasped in spite of myself, hardly daring to process his words.

"You're lying." It was Adrian who spoke, his tone harsh.

Robert glanced at him with an expression amused and scornful. "And who are you to say that? How can you tell? You've bruised and abused your powers so much, it's a wonder you can even touch the magic anymore. And all these things you do to yourself . . . it doesn't truly help, does it? Spirit's punishment still affects you . . . soon you won't be able to tell reality from dream. . . ."

The words stunned Adrian for a moment, but he kept going. "I don't need any physical signs to see that you're lying. I know you are because what you're describing is impossible. There's no way to save a Strigoi. When they're gone, they're gone. They're dead. Undead. Forever ."

"That which is dead doesn't always stay dead. . . ." Robert's words weren't directed at Adrian. They were spoken to me. I shivered.

"How? How did you do it?"

"With a stake. She was killed with a stake, and in doing so, was brought back to life."

"Okay," I said. "That *is* a lie. I've killed plenty of Strigoi with stakes, and believe me, they stay dead."

"Not just any stake." Robert's fingers danced along the edge of his glass. "A special stake."

“A stake charmed with spirit,” said Lissa suddenly.

He lifted his eyes to her and smiled. It was a creepy smile. “Yes. You are a clever, clever girl. A clever, gentle girl. Gentle and kind. I can see it in your aura.”

I stared off at the table, my mind in overdrive. A stake charmed with spirit. Silver stakes were charmed with the four main Moroi elements: earth, air, water, and fire. It was that infusion of life that destroyed the undead force within a Strigoi. With our recent discovery of how to charm objects with spirit, infusing a stake had never even occurred to us. Spirit healed. Spirit had brought me back from the dead. In joining with the other elements within a stake, was it truly possible that the twisted darkness that gripped Strigoi could be obliterated, thus restoring that person to their rightful state?

I was grateful for the food’s arrival because my brain was still moving sluggishly. The egg rolls provided a welcome opportunity to think.

“Is it really that easy?” I asked at last.

Robert scoffed. “It’s not easy at all.”

“But you just said . . . you just said we need a spirit-charmed stake. And then I kill a Strigoi with it.” Or well, not kill. The technicalities were irrelevant.

His smile returned. “Not you. You can’t do it.”

“Then who . . .” I stopped, the rest of my words dying on my lips. “No. *No*.”

“The shadow-kissed don’t have the gift of life. Only the spirit-blessed,” he explained. “The question is: Who’s capable of doing it? Gentle Girl or Drunken Sod?” His eyes flicked between Lissa and Adrian. “My wager would be on Gentle Girl.”

Those words were what snapped me out of my stunned state. In fact, they were what shattered this whole thing, this far-fetched dream of saving Dimitri.

“No,” I repeated. “Even if it was possible—and I’m not sure if I believe you—she can’t do it. I won’t let her.”

And in a turn of events almost as astonishing as Robert’s revelation, Lissa spun toward me, anger flooding our bond. “And since when can *you* tell me what I can or can’t do?”

“Since I don’t recall you ever taking guardian training and learning to stake a Strigoi,” I returned evenly, trying to keep my voice calm. “You only punched Reed, and that was hard enough.” When Avery Lazar had tried to take over Lissa’s mind, she’d sent her shadow-kissed brother to do some dirty work. With my help, Lissa had punched him and kept him away. It had been beautifully executed, but she’d hated it.

“I did it, didn’t I?” she exclaimed.

“Liss, throwing a punch is *nothing* like staking a Strigoi. And that’s not even counting the fact that you have to get near one in the first place. You think you could get in range before one bit you or snapped your neck? No.”

“I’ll learn.” The determination in her voice and mind was admirable, but it took guardians decades to learn what we did—and plenty still got killed.

Adrian and Eddie looked uncomfortable in the midst of our bickering, but Victor and Robert seemed both intrigued and amused. I didn’t like that. We weren’t here for their entertainment.

I tried to deflect the dangerous topic by turning back to Robert. “If a spirit

user brought back a Strigoi, then that person would become shadow-kissed." I didn't point out the obvious conclusion to Lissa. Part of what had driven Avery crazy (aside from normal spirit usage) had been bonding with more than one person. Doing so created a very unstable situation that rapidly led all people involved into darkness and insanity.

Robert's eyes grew dreamy as he stared beyond me. "Bonds form when someone dies—when their soul has actually left and moved onto the world of the dead. Bringing it back is what makes them shadow-kissed. Death's mark is upon them." His gaze suddenly snapped onto me. "Just as it is on you."

I refused to avoid his eyes, despite the chill his words sent through me. "Strigoi are dead. Saving one would mean its soul was brought back from the world of the dead too."

"No," he argued. "Their souls do not move on. Their souls linger . . . neither in this world nor the next. It's wrong and unnatural. It's what makes them what they are. Killing or saving a Strigoi sends the soul back to a normal state. There is no bond."

"Then there's no danger," Lissa said to me.

"Aside from a Strigoi killing you," I pointed out.

"Rose—"

"We'll finish this conversation later." I gave her a hard look. We held each other's gazes a moment, and then she turned to Robert. There was still an obstinacy in the bond I didn't like.

"How do you charm the stake?" she asked him. "I'm still learning."

I again started to chastise her and then thought better of it. Maybe Robert was wrong. Maybe all it actually took to convert a Strigoi was a spirit-infused stake. He only thought a spirit user had to do it because *he* had done it. Allegedly. Besides, I'd much rather Lissa preoccupy herself with charming than fighting. If the charm part sounded too hard, she might have to give up altogether.

Robert glanced at me and then Eddie. "One of you must have a stake on you. I'll show you."

"You can't take a stake out in public," exclaimed Adrian, in what was a remarkably wise observation. "It might be weird for humans, but it's still obvious that it's a weapon."

"He's right," Eddie said.

"We could go back to the room after dinner," said Victor.

He had that perfectly pleasant and bland look on his face. I studied him, hoping my expression showed my distrust. Even with her zeal, I could sense the hesitation in Lissa too. She wasn't keen on following any suggestion of Victor's. We'd seen in the past how desperately far Victor would go in attempting to fulfill his plans. He'd convinced his own daughter to turn Strigoi and help him escape jail. For all we knew, he was planning the same for—

"That's it," I gasped, feeling my eyes go wide as I stared at him.

"That's what?" Victor asked.

"That's why you had Natalie turn. You thought . . . you knew about this. What Robert had done. You were going to use her Strigoi strength and then have him turn her back."

Victor's already pale face went paler, and he seemed to age before our eyes.

His smug look disappeared, and he looked away. “Natalie is dead and long gone,” he said stiffly. “There’s no point in discussing her.”

Some of us made an attempt to eat after that, but my egg roll seemed tasteless now. Lissa and I were thinking the same thing. Among all of Victor’s sins, I’d always considered him convincing his own daughter to turn Strigoi to be the most awful. It was what had really sealed the deal for me about him being a monster. Suddenly, I was forced to reevaluate things—forced to reevaluate *him*. If he’d known he could bring her back, it made what he had done terrible—but not *as* terrible. He was still evil in my mind, no question. But if he had believed he could bring Natalie back, then that meant he believed in Robert’s power. There was still no way I was letting Lissa near a Strigoi, but this incredible tale had become slightly more credible. I couldn’t let it go without further investigation.

“We can go up to the room after this,” I said at last. “But not for long.” My words were to Victor and Robert. Robert seemed to have faded into his own world again, but Victor nodded.

I gave Eddie a quick glance and got a curt nod of a different sort from him. He understood the risk in taking the brothers to a private place. Eddie was telling me he would be extravigilant—not that he wasn’t already.

By the time we finished dinner, Eddie and I were both rigid and tense. He walked near Robert, and I stayed by Victor. We kept Lissa and Adrian between the brothers. Yet, even keeping close, it was hard as we cut through the crowded casino. People stopped in our path, walked around us, through us . . . it was chaos. Twice, our group got split by oblivious tourists. We weren’t too far from the elevators, but I was getting uneasy about the possibility of Victor or Robert running off through the mob of people

“We need to get out of this crowd,” I shouted over to Eddie.

He gave me another of his quick nods and took an abrupt left that caught me by surprise. I steered Victor in that same direction, and Lissa and Adrian sidestepped to keep up with us. I was puzzled until I saw that we were approaching a hall with an EMERGENCY EXIT sign on it. Away from the busy casino, the noise level dimmed.

“Figure there are probably stairs here,” Eddie explained.

“Crafty guardian.” I flashed him a smile.

Another turn showed us a janitorial closet on our right and ahead of us: a door with a symbol for stairs. The door appeared to lead both outside and to upper floors.

“Brilliant,” I said.

“You’re, like, on the tenth floor,” pointed out Adrian. It was the first time he’d spoken in a while.

“Nothing like a little exercise to—damn.” I came to an abrupt halt in front of the door. It had a small warning sign saying that an alarm would go off if the door was opened. “Figures.”

“Sorry,” said Eddie, like he was personally responsible.

“Not your fault,” I said, turning. “Back we go.” We’d have to take our chances in the crowd. Maybe the roundabout detour had tired Victor and Robert out enough to make escape unappealing. Neither of them was that young anymore, and Victor was still in bad shape.

Lissa was too tense to think much about being led around, but Adrian gave me a look that clearly said he thought this traipsing was a waste of his time. Of course, he thought this whole Robert thing was a waste of time. I was honestly surprised he was coming with us at all back to the room. I would have expected him to stay in the casino with his cigarettes and another drink.

Eddie, leading our group, took a few steps back toward the casino down the hallway. And then it hit me.

"Stop!" I screamed.

He responded instantly, coming to a halt in the narrow space. A bit of confusion followed. Victor stumbled into Eddie in surprise, and then Lissa stumbled into Victor. Instinct made Eddie reach for his stake, but mine was already out. I'd grabbed it as soon as the nausea had swept me.

There were Strigoi between us and the casino.

TEN

AND ONE OF THEM. ONE OF THEM.

No, I breathed, even as I sprang toward the one closest to me—a woman. There appeared to be three Strigoi around us.

Eddie was in motion too, and both of us were trying to shove the Moroi behind us. They didn't need much urging. At the sight of Strigoi, the Moroi had begun to back up—creating sort of a bottleneck. Between Eddie's instant reflexes and the Moroi panic, I was pretty sure no one had noticed what I already had spotted.

Dimitri was among them.

No, no, no, I said, this time to myself. He'd warned me. Over and over, he'd said in his letters that as soon as I was out of the safety of the wards, he would be coming for me. I'd believed him and yet . . . seeing the reality of it was a totally different thing. It had been three months, but in that instant, a million memories ran through my mind in crystal clear sharpness. My captivity with Dimitri. The way his mouth—so, so warm, despite his cold skin—had kissed mine. The feel of his fangs pressing into my neck and the sweet bliss that followed . . .

He looked exactly the same too, with that chalky white pallor and red-ringed eyes that so conflicted with the soft, chin-length brown hair and otherwise gorgeous lines of his face. He even had a leather duster on. It had to be a new one, seeing as his previous coat had gotten pretty torn up in our last fight on the bridge. Where did he keep getting them?

"Get out!" I yelled. My words were to the Moroi, even as my stake bit into the female Strigoi's heart. The momentary confusion with all of us in the hall had been more of a detriment to her than me. I got a good line of sight on her, and it was clear that she hadn't expected me to be so fast. I'd killed a lot of Strigoi because they'd underestimated me.

Eddie didn't have my luck. He stumbled when Victor shoved past him, allowing the other Strigoi—a guy—near the front to backhand Eddie against the wall. Still, that was the kind of thing we faced all the time, and Eddie responded beautifully. He immediately came back from the hit, and with the Moroi out of the way now, Eddie was able to lunge toward the Strigoi and engage him fully.

And me? My attention was on Dimitri.

I stepped over the fallen Strigoi without even looking at her. Dimitri had hovered near the back, sending his minions into the front lines of battle. Maybe it was because I knew Dimitri so well, but I suspected he wasn't surprised that I'd take out the one so quickly and that Eddie was giving the other a tough time. I doubted Dimitri cared whether they lived or died. They were just distractions for him to get to me.

"I told you," said Dimitri, eyes both amused and sharp. He was watching my

every move, each of us subconsciously mirroring the other as we waited for an opening to attack. “I told you I’d find you.”

“Yeah,” I said, trying to ignore the grunts of Eddie and the other Strigoi. Eddie could take him. I knew he could. “I got the memos.”

A ghost of a smile curled up Dimitri’s lips, showing the fangs that somehow triggered a mix of both longing and loathing in me. Instantly, I shoved those feelings aside. I’d hesitated before with Dimitri and nearly died because of it. I’d refused to let it happen again, and the adrenaline pumping through my body served as a good reminder that this was a do-or-die situation.

He made the first move, but I dodged it—almost having sensed it coming. That was the problem with us. We knew each other too well—knew each other’s moves too well. Of course, that hardly meant we were an even match. Even in life, he’d had more experience than me, and his Strigoi abilities tipped the scale.

“Yet here you are,” he said, still smiling. “Foolishly stepping outside when you should have stayed in the safety of Court. I couldn’t believe it when my spies told me.”

I said nothing, instead attempting a swipe with my stake. He saw that coming too and sidestepped it. His having spies didn’t surprise me—even in the daytime. He controlled a network of Strigoi and humans alike, and I’d known he had eyes and ears observing Court. The question was: How the hell had he gotten into this hotel in the middle of the day? Even with human watchers at the airport or monitoring credit cards as Adrian had done, Dimitri and his Strigoi friends should have had to wait until nightfall to get here.

No, not necessarily, I realized a moment later. Strigoi occasionally had work-arounds. Trucks and vans with dark, completely sealed cabins. Underground entrances. Moroi wanting to casino-jump from the Witching Hour knew about secret tunnels connecting certain buildings. Dimitri would have known about all this too. If he’d been waiting for me to come outside of wards, he would have done whatever it took to get to me. I knew better than anyone else how resourceful he was.

I also knew he was trying to distract me with talking.

“And strangest of all,” he continued, “you didn’t come alone. You brought Moroi. You’ve always taken risks with your own life, but I didn’t expect you to be so hasty with theirs.”

Something occurred to me then. Aside from the faint hum of the casino on the other end of the hallway and the sounds of our fight, everything else was silent. We were missing an important noise. Say, like, the alarm from a fire door.

“Lissa!” I yelled. “Get the hell out of here! Get them *all* out of here.”

She should have known better. They all should have known better. That door led to the upper floors—and outdoors. The sun was still out. It didn’t matter if the alarm brought hotel security down on us. Hell, that might scare the Strigoi off. What mattered was that the Moroi fled to safety.

But a quick check of my bond told me the problem. Lissa was frozen. Stunned. She’d suddenly seen who I was fighting, and the shock of it was too much. Knowing Dimitri was a Strigoi was one thing. Seeing it—really, really seeing it—well, that was different. I knew from personal experience. Even

after being prepared, his appearance still unnerved me. She was blindsided, unable to think or move.

It only took me a heartbeat to assess her feelings, but in a fight with a Strigoi, a single second could be the difference between life and death. Dimitri's chatter had worked, and although I watched him and thought I had my guard up, he got through and shoved me against the wall, hands pinning my arms so painfully that I lost my grip on the stake.

He put his face right up to mine, so close that our foreheads touched. "Roza . . ." he murmured. His breath was warm and sweet against my skin. It seemed like it should have smelled like death or decay, but it didn't. "Why? Why did you have to be so difficult? We could have spent eternity together . . ."

My heart thundered in my chest. I was afraid, terrified of the death that I knew had to be seconds away. And at the same time, I was filled with sorrow over having lost him. Seeing the features of his face, hearing that same accented voice that even now wrapped around me like velvet . . . I felt my heart breaking all over again. Why? Why had this happened to us? Why was the universe so cruel?

I managed to flip the switch again, once more shutting out the fact that this was Dimitri. We were predator and prey—and I was in danger of being eaten.

"Sorry," I said through gritted teeth, shoving hard—and failing—to break his grip. "My eternity doesn't involve being part of the undead mafia."

"I know," he said. I could have sworn there was sadness in his face but later convinced myself I must have imagined it. "Eternity will be lonely without you."

A piercing shriek suddenly rang in my ears. Both of us winced. Noises intended to startle humans were hell on sensitive hearing like we had. Yet I couldn't help but feel relief. The fire door. Finally, those idiots—and yes, I had no qualms about calling my friends idiots when they were acting that way—had left the building. I felt sunlight through the bond and took comfort in that as Dimitri's fangs neared the artery that would spill the life's blood from my neck.

I hoped the alarm would distract him, but he was too good. I struggled once more, hoping I could use surprise on him, but it was to no avail. What *did* surprise him was Eddie's stake plunging into the side of his stomach.

Dimitri snarled in pain and let go of me, turning on Eddie. Eddie's face was hard, unblinking. If seeing Dimitri fazed him, my friend didn't show it. For all I knew, Eddie wasn't even registering this as Dimitri. Probably all he saw was a Strigoi. It was the way we were trained. See monsters, not people.

Dimitri's attention was off me for the moment. He wanted to draw out my death. Eddie was simply an annoyance he needed to rid us of so that he could continue the game.

Eddie and Dimitri engaged in a dance similar to the one I'd been in with Dimitri earlier, except that Eddie didn't know Dimitri's moves like I did. So Eddie wasn't able to completely avoid Dimitri grabbing him by the shoulder and shoving him to the wall. The maneuver had been intended to crush Eddie's skull, but Eddie managed to shift enough so that it was his body that took the brunt of the impact. It still hurt, but he was alive.

All of this took place in milliseconds. And in those fleeting moments, my

perspective shifted. When Dimitri had been looming over me, about to bite me, I had managed to overcome that impulse to think of him *as* Dimitri, the person I'd once known and loved. Continually forced into a victim position, with my life about to end, I had kept kicking myself into *fight-fight-fight* mode.

Now, watching someone else battle Dimitri . . . seeing Eddie's stake snake out at him . . . well, suddenly, I lost that cool objectivity. I remembered why I'd come here. I remembered what we'd just learned from Robert.

Fragile. It was still all so fragile. I'd sworn to myself that if we reached a moment where Dimitri was about to kill me and I hadn't learned more about saving Strigoi, I would do it. I would kill him. And this was my chance. Between Eddie and me, we could take Dimitri down. We could end this evil state, just as he'd once wanted.

Yet . . . less than a half hour ago, I'd been given a small piece of hope that a Strigoi could be saved. True, that part about a spirit user doing it was absurd, but Victor had believed. And if someone like him had believed . . .

I couldn't do it. Dimitri couldn't die. Not yet.

I shot out with my stake, a hard strike that raked the silver point against the back of Dimitri's head. He let out a roar of rage and managed to turn and push me off while still fending Eddie away. Dimitri was that good. But Eddie's stake was getting closer to Dimitri's heart, and my friend's gaze was unwavering, intent on his kill.

Dimitri's attention flitted between the two of us, and in one small lapse—only half a breath long—I saw Eddie get his stake in the zone, ready to take a shot at Dimitri's heart. A shot that looked like it might succeed where mine had failed.

And that was why, in one smooth motion, I struck out with my stake, swiping it across Dimitri's face and knocking Eddie's arm aside as I did. It was a beautiful face. I hated to mar it but knew Dimitri would heal. As I made that attack, I pushed past him, shoving into Eddie so that he and I stumbled toward the fire door that was still shrieking its warning. Eddie's stony face registered surprise, and for a moment we were deadlocked: me pushing him to the door and him pushing back toward Dimitri. I saw the hesitation, though. The positioning was off, and Eddie was on the verge of shoving me into a Strigoi, which his training wouldn't allow.

Dimitri was already seizing the opportunity, though. His hand reached out and grabbed my shoulder, trying to jerk me back. Eddie caught hold of my arm and pulled me forward. I cried out in surprise and pain. It felt like they were going to rip me in two. Dimitri was by far the strongest, but even stuck in the middle, my weight played a role, and I lent my force to Eddie's, which helped us gain some ground. Still, it was slow going. Like walking in honey. For each step I managed forward, Dimitri dragged me back.

But Eddie and I were making slow—and very, very painful—progress toward the wailing door. A few moments later, I heard the clatter of feet and voices. "Security," grunted Eddie, giving me a tug.

"Shit," I said.

"You can't win," Dimitri hissed. He'd managed to get both hands on my shoulders now and was overpowering us.

"Oh yeah? We're about to have the entire Luxor Attack Squad here."

"We're about to have a pile of bodies here. Humans," he said dismissively.

Those humans reached us. I'm not sure what their impressions were. Some guy attacking teenagers? They shouted about us all letting go and facing them, directions the three of us ignored in our epic tug-of-war match. Then they must have laid hands on Dimitri. He was still gripping me, but his hold slackened enough that one huge pull from Eddie and a near-leap on my part broke me free. Eddie and I didn't even look back, though the security guards were now shouting at us too.

They weren't the only ones shouting. Just before I pushed open the door, I heard Dimitri calling to me. There was laughter in his voice. "It's not over, Roza. Do you really think there's anywhere you can go in this world where I can't find you?" The same warning, always the same warning.

I did my best to ignore the fear those words inspired. Eddie and I burst into smoggy desert air, as well as sunshine that was still hanging in there, despite being early evening. We were in the Luxor's parking lot—which wasn't crowded enough for us to hide in. With no spoken communication, he and I tore off toward the busy Strip, knowing our physical abilities would surpass those of any human pursuers and let us get lost in the mobs of people.

It worked. I never saw how many followed us. My guess was the security staff were devoting their attention to the tall guy killing people in their hotel. The voices shouting after us faded, and Eddie and I finally slowed to a stop in front of New York-New York, and again, without even talking, we immediately turned inside the hotel. It had a twisted layout and was more crowded than the Luxor, and we easily blended in until we could find an empty spot of wall on the far side of the hotel's casino.

The run had been hard even for us, and it took us a moment to catch our breath as we stood there. I knew things were serious when Eddie finally turned on me, and anger lit his features. Eddie was always the picture of calm and control, ever since his first abduction by Strigoi last year. It had toughened him, made him more determined to face any challenge. But oh, was he mad at me now.

"What the hell was that?" exclaimed Eddie. "You let him go!"

I put on my best tough face, but he seemed to be outdoing me today. "What, did you miss the part where I was slashing him with my stake?"

"I had his heart! I had a shot, and you stopped me!"

"Security was coming. We didn't have time. We had to get out of there, and we couldn't let them see *us* do the killing."

"I don't think any of them are left to report seeing anything," Eddie replied evenly. He seemed to be trying to regain his composure. "Dimitri left a pile of corpses there. You know it. People died because *you* wouldn't let me stake him."

I flinched, realizing Eddie was right. It should have ended there. I hadn't gotten a good look at the number of security guards. How many had died? It wasn't relevant. Only the fact that innocent people had died mattered. Even one was too many. And it was my fault.

My silence caused Eddie to press his advantage. "How could you of all people forget that lesson? I know he used to be your instructor—*used to be*. But he's not the same. They drilled that into us over and over. Don't hesitate.

Don't think of him as a real person."

"I love him," I blurted out, without meaning to. Eddie hadn't known. Only a handful of people knew about my romantic relationship with Dimitri and what had happened in Siberia.

"What?" Eddie exclaimed with a gasp. His outrage had transformed to shock.

"Dimitri . . . he's more than my instructor . . ."

Eddie continued staring at me for several heavy seconds. "Was," he said at last.

"Huh?"

"He *was* more than your instructor. You *loved* him." Eddie's momentary confusion was gone. He was back to hard guardian now, no sympathy. "I'm sorry, but it's in the past, whatever was between you. You have to know that. The person you loved is gone. The guy we just saw? Not the same."

I slowly shook my head. "I . . . I know. I know it's not him. I know he's a monster, but we can save him . . . if we can do what Robert was telling us about. . . ."

Eddie's eyes widened, and for a moment, he was dumbstruck. "*That's* what this is about? Rose, that's ridiculous! You can't believe that. Strigoi are dead. They're gone to us. Robert and Victor were feeding you a bunch of crap."

Now I grew surprised. "Then why are you even here? Why have you stuck with us?"

He threw his hands up in exasperation. "Because you're my *friend*. I stayed with you through all of this . . . breaking out Victor, listening to his crazy brother . . . because I knew you needed me. You all did, to help keep you safe. I thought you had a real reason for getting Victor out—and that you were going to return him. Does it sound crazy? Yeah, but that's normal for you. You've always had good reasons for what you do." He sighed. "But this . . . this is crossing a line. Letting Strigoi go in order to chase some idea—some idea that couldn't possibly work—is ten times worse than what we did with Victor. A hundred times worse. Every day Dimitri walks the world is another day that people are going to die."

I collapsed against the wall and closed my eyes, feeling sick to my stomach. Eddie was right. I had screwed up. I'd promised myself that I would kill Dimitri if I faced him before we could pursue Robert's solution. It all should have ended today . . . but I had choked up. Again.

I opened my eyes and straightened up, needing to find a new purpose before I burst into tears in the middle of this casino. "We have to find the others. They're out there unprotected."

It was probably the only thing that could have stopped Eddie's scolding just then. Instinctual duty kicked in. Protect Moroi.

"Can you tell where Lissa's at?"

My bond had kept me connected to her during our escape, but I hadn't allowed myself any deeper probing than confirming she was alive and okay. I expanded the link a little further now. "Across the street. At MGM." I'd seen the ginormous hotel when we ran into this one but hadn't realized Lissa was there. Now I could feel her, hiding out in a crowd like us, scared but not injured. I would have rather she and the others opted to hang out in the sun,

but instinct had driven her to the shelter of walls.

Eddie and I spoke no more about Dimitri as we headed out and crossed the busy road. The sky was turning peach, but I still felt secure out there. Far more secure than in the Luxor's hallway. With the bond, I could always find Lissa, and without any hesitation, I led Eddie through MGM's twists and turns —honestly, the layout of these places just got more and more confusing—until we saw Lissa and Adrian standing near a row of slot machines. He was smoking. She spotted me, sprinted over, and threw her arms around me.

"Oh my God. I was so scared. I didn't know what had happened to you guys. I *hate* that one-way bond."

I forced a smile for her. "We're fine."

"In a bruised kind of way," mused Adrian, strolling over. I didn't doubt it. In the adrenaline of a fight, it was easy to not notice injuries and pain. Later, when the battle lust faded, you started to realize just what you'd put your body through.

I was so grateful to see Lissa okay that I missed what Eddie had already noticed. "You guys, where are Victor and Robert?"

Lissa's happy face crumpled, and even Adrian looked grim. "Damn it," I said, needing no explanation.

Lissa nodded, eyes wide and distraught. "We lost them."

ELEVEN

WELL. HOW PERFECT.

It took us a while to decide our next course of action. We tossed around a few feeble ideas to track Robert and Victor, all of which we eventually shot down. Robert's phone was a cell, and while the CIA could trace those kinds of things, we certainly couldn't. Even if Robert's address was listed in the phone book, I knew Victor wouldn't have let them go back there. And while Adrian and Lissa could spot a spirit user's aura, we could hardly go wandering aimlessly in a city and expect to find something.

No, we were out of luck with those two. There was nothing to be done now but head back to Court and face whatever punishment awaited us. We—*I*—had screwed up.

With sunset approaching—and seeing as we no longer had a known criminal to get us in trouble—my group glumly decided to head to the Witching Hour to make our travel plans. Lissa and I had the potential to be recognized over there, but runaway girls weren't quite in the same category as fugitive traitors. We decided to roll the dice (no pun intended) and hang around guardians rather than risk more Strigoi attacks before we could get out of Vegas.

The Witching Hour was no different from any of the other casinos we'd been to—unless you knew what to look for. Humans there were too interested in the allure of the games and glitz to notice that a lot of the other patrons were uniformly tall, slim, and pale. As for the dhampirs? Humans couldn't tell that we weren't human. It was only the uncanny sense Moroi and dhampirs had that let us know who was who.

Sprinkled throughout the cheering, chattering, and—at times—wailing crowd were guardians. As in demand as guardians were, only a handful could be allocated full-time to a place like this. Fortunately, their numbers were reinforced by the wealthy and powerful who'd come to play. Excited Moroi whooped over slot machines or roulette while silent, watchful guardians hovered behind them, keeping an eye on everything. No Strigoi would come here.

"What now?" asked Lissa, almost yelling over the noise. It was the first time any of us had spoken since deciding to go here. We'd come to a halt near some blackjack tables, right in the thick of everything.

I sighed. My mood was so dark, I didn't even need any spirit side effects. *I lost Victor, I lost Victor.* My own mental accusations were on an endless loop.

"We find their business center and book tickets out of here," I said. "Depending on how long until we can catch a flight, we might have to get a room again."

Adrian's eyes were scanning the action around us, lingering longest on one of the many bars. "Wouldn't kill us to spend a little time here."

I snapped. "Really? After everything that's happened, that's all you can

think about?"

His enraptured gaze turned back to me and became a frown. "There are cameras here. People who may recognize you. Getting hard proof that you were in this casino and *not* Alaska is a good thing."

"True," I admitted. I think Adrian's typical blasé air was masking discomfort. Aside from learning why I'd really come to Las Vegas, he'd also run into Strigoi—Dimitri among them. That was never an easy experience for any Moroi. "Though we've got no alibi for when we were actually *in* Alaska."

"So long as Victor doesn't get himself spotted around here, no one's going to make the connection." Adrian's voice became bitter. "Which really shows how stupid they all are."

"We helped put Victor away," said Lissa. "No one would think we'd be crazy enough to let him out."

Eddie, staying silent, gave me a pointed look.

"Then it's settled," said Adrian. "Somebody go book us tickets. I'm going to get a drink and try my hand at some games. The universe owes me some good luck."

"I'll get the tickets," said Lissa, scanning a sign that pointed out the directions for the pool, restrooms—and business center.

"I'll go with you," said Eddie. Whereas before his expression had been accusatory, he now seemed to be avoiding my eyes altogether.

"Fine," I said, crossing my arms. "Let me know when you're done, and we'll find you." That was to Lissa, meaning she'd tell me through the bond.

Convinced he was free, Adrian headed straight for the bar, me trailing after him.

"A Tom Collins," he told the Moroi bartender. It was like Adrian had a mental cocktail dictionary in his head and just checked them off one by one. I almost never saw him drink the same thing twice.

"You want it spiked?" the bartender asked. He wore a crisp white shirt and black bow tie and hardly appeared older than me.

Adrian made a face. "No."

The bartender shrugged and turned around to make the drink. "Spiked" was Moroi code for putting a shot of blood into the drink. There were a couple of doors behind the bar, ones that probably led to feeders. Glancing down the bar, I could see happy, laughing Moroi with red-tinged drinks. Some liked the thought of having blood with their alcohol. Most—like Adrian, apparently—wouldn't take blood unless it was "straight from the source." It supposedly didn't taste the same.

While we waited, an older Moroi standing next to Adrian glanced over at me and nodded with approval. "You got yourself a good one," he told Adrian. "Young, but that's the best way." The guy, who was either drinking red wine or pure blood, jerked his head toward the others standing at the bar. "Most of these are used and washed-up."

I followed his shrug, even through there was no need. Interspersed among the humans and Moroi were several dhampir women, dressed very glamorously in silk and velvet dresses that left little to the imagination. Most were older than me. Those who weren't had a weary look in their eyes, despite their flirtatious laughter. Blood whores. I glared at the Moroi.

"Don't you *dare* talk about them like that, or I'll smash that wineglass in your face."

The guy's eyes widened, and he looked at Adrian. "Feisty."

"You have no idea," said Adrian. The bartender returned with the Tom Collins. "She's had kind of a bad day."

The asshole Moroi guy didn't look back at me. He apparently didn't take my threat nearly as seriously as he should have. "Everyone's having kind of a bad day. You hear the news?"

Adrian looked relaxed and amused as he sipped his drink, but standing so close to him, I felt him stiffen a little. "What news?"

"Victor Dashkov. You know, that guy who kidnapped the Dragomir girl and was plotting against the queen? He escaped."

Adrian's eyebrows rose. "Escaped? That's crazy. I heard he was at some maximum-security place."

"He was. No one really knows what happened. There were supposedly humans involved . . . and then the story gets weird."

"How weird?" I asked.

Adrian slipped an arm around me, which I suspected was a silent message to let him do the talking. Whether that was because he believed that was "proper" blood whore behavior or because he was worried I'd punch the guy, I couldn't say.

"One of the guards was in on it—though he claims he was being controlled. He also conveniently says it's all a haze and he can't remember much. I heard it from some royals who are helping with the investigation."

Adrian laughed, taking down a big gulp of his drink. "That *is* convenient. Sounds like an inside job to me. Victor'd have a lot of money. Easy enough to bribe a guard. That's what I think happened."

There was a pleasant smoothness to Adrian's voice, and as a slightly dopey smile came over the other guy's face, I realized Adrian had pulled a little compulsion. "I bet you're right."

"You should tell your royal friends," added Adrian. "An inside job."

The guy nodded eagerly. "I will."

Adrian held his gaze a few moments more and then finally glanced down to the Tom Collins. The glaze-eyed look faded from the man, but I knew Adrian's order to spread the "inside job" story would stick. Adrian gulped down the rest of the drink and set the empty glass on the bar. He was about to speak again when something across the room caught his attention. The Moroi man noticed too, and I followed both of their gazes to see what had them both so starstruck.

I groaned. Women, of course. At first I thought they were dhampirs since my kind seemed to be making up most of the eye candy here. A double take revealed a surprise: The women were Moroi. Moroi showgirls, to be precise. There were several of them, clad in similar short, low-cut sequined dresses. Only, each one wore a different jewel-toned color: copper, peacock blue . . . Feathers and rhinestones glittered in their hair, and they smiled and laughed as they passed through the gaping crowd, beautiful and sexy in a way different from my race.

Which wasn't a surprise. I tended to notice Moroi men ogling dhampir girls

more often, simply because I was a dhampir. But naturally, Moroi men were attracted to and infatuated with their own women. It was how their race survived, and though Moroi men might want to fool around with dhampirs, they almost always ended up with their own kind in the end.

The showgirls were tall and graceful, and their fresh, brilliant appearances made me think they must be on their way to a performance. I could just imagine what a glittering display of dancing they must make. I could appreciate that, but Adrian clearly appreciated it more, judging from his wide-eyed look. I elbowed him.

"Hey!"

The last of the showgirls disappeared through the casino crowd, off toward a sign that said THEATER, just as I'd suspected. Adrian looked back at me, turning on a rogue smile.

"Nothing wrong with looking." He patted my shoulder.

The Moroi standing next to him nodded in agreement. "I think I might take in a show today." He swirled his drink around. "All this Dashkov business and that mess with the Dragomirs . . . makes me sad for poor Eric. He was a good guy."

I put on a dubious look. "You knew Lissa's fath—Eric Dragomir?"

"Sure." The Moroi gestured for a refill. "I've been a manager here for years. He was here all the time. Believe me, *he* had an appreciation for those girls."

"You're lying," I said coolly. "He adored his wife." I'd seen Lissa's parents together. Even at a young age, I'd been able to see how crazy in love they were.

"I'm not saying he *did* anything. Like your boyfriend said, nothing wrong with looking. But a lot of people knew the Dragomir prince liked to party it up wherever he went—especially if there was female company." The Moroi sighed and lifted his glass. "Damn shame what happened to him. Here's hoping they catch that Dashkov bastard and leave Eric's little girl alone."

I didn't like this guy's insinuations about Lissa's dad and was grateful she wasn't around. What made me uneasy was that we'd recently found out Lissa's brother Andre had also been kind of a party boy who fooled around and broke hearts. Did that kind of thing run in the family? What Andre had done wasn't right, but there was a big difference between a teenage boy's exploits and those of a married man. I didn't like to admit it, but even the most in-love guys still checked out other women without cheating. Adrian was proof. Still, I didn't think Lissa would like the idea of her dad flirting around with other women. The truth about Andre had been hard enough, and I didn't want anything to shatter the angelic memories of her parents.

I shot Adrian a look that said listening to this guy any longer really would come down to a fistfight. I didn't want to be standing here if Lissa came searching for us. Adrian, always more astute than he appeared, smiled down at me.

"Well, my sweet, shall we try our luck? Something tells me you're going to beat the odds—like always."

I cut him a look. "Cute."

Adrian winked at me and stood up. "Nice talking to you," he told the Moroi.

"You too," the man said. The thrall of compulsion was wearing off. "You

should dress her better, you know."

"I'm not interested in putting clothes *on* her," Adrian called as he steered me away.

"Watch it," I warned through gritted teeth, "or you might be the one with a wineglass in your face."

"I'm playing a part, little dhampir. One that's going to make sure you stay out of trouble." We stopped near the casino's poker room, and Adrian gave me a head-to-toe assessment. "That guy was right about the clothes, though."

I gritted my teeth. "I can't believe he said those things about Lissa's dad."

"Gossip and rumors never go away—you of all people should know that. Doesn't matter if you're dead. Besides, that conversation was actually to our—by which I mean *your*—advantage. Somebody else is probably considering the inside-job theory already. If that guy can help get it around even more, it'll ensure no one even thinks the world's most dangerous guardian could have been involved."

"I suppose." Forcibly, I pushed my temper down. I had always been trigger-happy, and I knew for sure now that the bits of darkness I'd gleaned from Lissa in the last twenty-four hours were making things worse, as I'd feared. I changed the subject, steering to safer ground. "You're being pretty nice now, considering how mad you were earlier."

"I'm not all that happy, but I've done some thinking," Adrian said.

"Oh? Care to enlighten me?

"Not here. We'll talk later. We've got more important things to worry about."

"Like covering up a crime and getting out of this city without being attacked by Strigoi?"

"No. Like me winning money."

"Are you crazy?" Asking Adrian that was never a good idea. "We just escaped a bunch of bloodthirsty monsters, and all you can think about is gambling?"

"The fact that we're alive means we should live," he argued. "Especially if we've got the time, anyway."

"You don't need any more money."

"I will if my dad turns me out. Besides, it's really about enjoying the game."

By "enjoying the game," I soon realized that Adrian meant "cheating." If you considered using spirit cheating. Because there was so much mental power tied into spirit, its users were very good at reading people. Victor had been right. Adrian joked and kept ordering drinks, but I could tell he was paying close attention to the others. And even though he was careful not to say anything explicitly, his expressions spoke for him—confident, uncertain, annoyed. Without words, he was still able to project compulsion and bluff the other players.

"Be right back," I told him, feeling Lissa's call.

He waved me off, unconcerned. I wasn't worried about his safety either, seeing as there were a few guardians in the room. What concerned me was the possibility some casino official would notice his compulsion and throw us all out. Spirit users wielded it the most strongly, but all vampires had it to a certain extent. Using it was considered immoral, so it was banned among

Moroi. A casino would definitely have reason to be on the lookout for it.

The business center turned out to be near the poker room, and I found Lissa and Eddie quickly. "What's the report?" I asked as we walked back.

"We've got a flight in the morning," said Lissa. She hesitated. "We could have gone out tonight, but . . ."

She didn't need to finish. After what we'd faced today, no one wanted to risk even the slightest chance of running into a Strigoi. Going to the airport would only require a taxi ride, but even still, that would mean we'd have to risk walking out into the darkness.

I shook my head and led them toward the poker room. "You did the right thing. We've got time to kill now. . . . Do you want to get a room and get some sleep?"

"No." She shivered, and I felt fear in her. "I don't want to leave this crowd. And I'm kind of afraid of what I'd dream. . . ."

Adrian might be able to act like he didn't care about the Strigoi, but those faces were still haunting Lissa—especially Dimitri's. "Well," I said, hoping to make her feel better, "staying up will help get us back on the Court's schedule. You can also watch Adrian get thrown out by casino security."

As I'd hoped, watching Adrian cheat with spirit did indeed distract Lissa—so much so that she grew interested in trying it herself. Great. I urged her to safer games and recapped how Adrian had planted the idea of an inside job in the Moroi guy's head. I left out the part about Lissa's father. The night miraculously passed without incident—either of the Strigoi or security type—and a couple of people even recognized Lissa, which would help our alibi. Eddie didn't speak to me the entire night.

We left the Witching Hour in the morning. None of us were happy about losing Victor or the attack, but the casino had soothed us all a little—at least until we got to the airport. At the casino, we'd been flooded with Moroi news, insulated from the human world. But while waiting for our plane, we couldn't help but watch the TVs that seemed to be everywhere.

The headline story that night was all about a mass killing over at the Luxor, one that had left no clues for the police. Most of the casino guards involved had died from broken necks, and no other bodies were found. My guess was that Dimitri had tossed his cronies outside, where the sun would turn them to ash. Meanwhile, Dimitri himself had slipped away, leaving no other witnesses behind. Even the cameras had recorded nothing, which didn't surprise me. If I could disable surveillance at a prison, Dimitri could certainly manage it at a human hotel.

Whatever mood-improvement we'd achieved instantly disappeared, and we didn't talk much. I stayed out of Lissa's mind because I didn't need her depressed feelings amplifying my own.

We'd arranged a direct flight to Philadelphia and would then catch a commuter flight back to the airport near Court. What we'd face once there . . . well, that was probably the least of our concerns.

I wasn't worried about Strigoi boarding our plane in the daytime, and without any prisoners to watch, I allowed myself to fall into much-needed sleep. I couldn't remember the last time I'd gotten any on this trip. I slept heavily, but my dreams were haunted by the fact that I'd let one of the

Moroi's most dangerous criminals escape *and* allowed a Strigoi to walk free *and* gotten a bunch of humans killed. I held none of my friends responsible. This disaster was all on me.

TWELVE

WHICH WAS CONFIRMED WHEN WE finally stumbled back to the Royal Court.

I wasn't the only one in trouble, of course. Lissa was summoned to the queen for chastising, though I knew she'd suffer no actual punishment. Not like Eddie and me. We might be out of school, but we were technically under the jurisdiction of the official guardians now, which meant we faced as much trouble as any disobedient employee. Only Adrian escaped any consequences. He was free to do whatever he wanted.

And really, my punishment wasn't as bad as it could have been. Honestly, what did I have to lose at this point? My chances of guarding Lissa had already been sketchy, and no one had wanted me as a guardian except Tasha anyway. A crazy Vegas weekend—which was our cover story—was hardly enough to dissuade her from taking me on. It was enough, however, to make some of Eddie's prospects withdraw their requests for him to be their guardian. Enough still wanted him that he was in no danger of losing a good position, but I felt horribly guilty. He didn't breathe a word to anyone about what we'd done, but each time he looked at me, I could see the condemnation in his eyes.

And I saw a lot of him in the next couple days. It turned out guardians had a system in place to deal with those who were disobedient.

"What you did was so irresponsible that you might as well be back in school. Hell, elementary school, even."

We were in one of the offices in the guardians' headquarters, being yelled at by Hans Croft, the guy in charge of all the guardians at Court and someone who was instrumental in guardian assignments. He was a dhampir in his early fifties, with a bushy gray-and-white mustache. He was also an asshole. The scent of cigar smoke always encircled him. Eddie and I were sitting meekly before him while he paced with his hands behind his back.

"You could have gotten the last Dragomir killed—not to mention the Ivashkov boy. How do you think the queen would have reacted to the death of her great-nephew? And talk about timing! You go off party-hopping right when the guy who tried to kidnap the princess is running loose. Not that you would know that, seeing as you were probably too busy playing slot machines and using your fake IDs."

I winced at the reference to Victor, though I suppose I should have been relieved that we were above suspicion for his escape. Hans read my grimace as an admission of guilt.

"You might have graduated," he declared, "but that does *not* mean you are invincible."

This whole encounter reminded me of when Lissa and I had returned to St. Vladimir's, when we'd been chastised for the same thing: recklessly running

off and endangering her. Only this time, there was no Dimitri to defend me. That memory made a lump form in my throat as I remembered his face, serious and gorgeous, those brown eyes intense and passionate as he spoke up for me and convinced the others of my value.

But no. No Dimitri here. It was just Eddie and me alone, facing the consequences of the real world.

"You." Hans pointed a stubby finger at Eddie. "You might be lucky enough to slide out of this without too many repercussions. Sure, you'll have a black mark on your record forever. And you've totally screwed up your chances of ever having an elite royal position with other guardians to support you. You'll get some assignment though. Working alone with some minor nobility, probably."

High-ranking royals had more than one guardian, which always made protection easier. Hans's point was that Eddie's assignment would be lowly—creating more work and danger for him. Casting him a sidelong glance, I saw that hard, determined look on his face again. It seemed to say he didn't care if he had to guard a family by himself. Or even ten families. In fact, he gave off the vibe that they could drop him alone into a nest of Strigoi and he'd take them all on.

"And *you*." Hans's sharp voice jerked my gaze back to him. "You will be lucky to ever have a job."

Like always, I spoke without thinking. I should have taken this silently like Eddie. "Of course I'll have one. Tasha Ozera wants me. And you're too short on guardians to keep me sitting around."

Hans's eyes gleamed with bitter amusement. "Yes, we are short on guardians, but there's all sorts of work we need done—not just personal protection. Someone has to staff our offices. Someone has to sit and guard the front gates."

I froze. A desk job. Hans was threatening me with a desk job. All of my horrible imaginings had involved me guarding some random Moroi, someone I didn't know and would possibly hate. But in any of those scenarios, I would be out in the world. I would be in motion. I would be fighting and defending.

But this? Hans was right. Guardians were needed for the Court's administrative jobs. True, they only kept a handful—we were too valuable—but someone had to do it. One of those someones being me was too awful to comprehend. Sitting around all day for hours and hours . . . like the guards in Tarasov. Guardian life had all sorts of unglamorous—but necessary—tasks.

It truly, truly hit me then that I was in the real world. Fear slammed into me. I'd taken on the title of guardian when I graduated, but had I really understood what it meant? Had I been playing make-believe—enjoying the perks and ignoring the consequences? I was out of school. There would be no detention for this. This was real. This was life and death.

My face must have given away my feelings. Hans gave a small, cruel smile. "That's right. We've got all sorts of ways to tame troublemakers. Lucky for you, your ultimate fate's still being decided. And in the meantime, there's *a lot* of work that needs to be done around here that you two are going to be helping with."

That "work" over the next few days turned out to be menial manual labor.

Honestly, it wasn't too different from detention, and I was pretty sure it had just been created to give wrongdoers like us something awful to do. We worked twelve hours a day, much of it outdoors hauling rocks and dirt to build some new, pretty courtyard for a set of royal town houses. Sometimes we were put on cleaning duty, scrubbing floors. I knew they had Moroi workers for these kinds of things, and probably they were being given a vacation right now.

Still, it was better than the other work Hans would give us: sorting and filing mountains and mountains of paper. That gave me a new appreciation for information going digital . . . and again made me worry about the future. Over and over, I kept thinking about that initial conversation with Hans. The threat that this could be my life. That I would never be a guardian—in the true sense—to Lissa or any other Moroi. Throughout my training, we'd always had a mantra: *They come first*. If I had really and truly screwed up my future, I'd have a new mantra: *A comes first. Then B, C, D* . . .

Those work days kept me away from Lissa, and the front-desk staff within our respective buildings went out of their way to keep us apart too. It was frustrating. I could keep track of her through the link, but I wanted to talk to her. I wanted to talk to anyone. Adrian stayed away too and didn't bother with dreams, making me wonder how he felt. We'd never had our "talk" after Las Vegas. Eddie and I often worked side by side, but he wasn't speaking to me, which left me with hours of being trapped with my own thoughts and guilt.

And believe me, I had plenty of things to intensify my guilt. Around Court, people didn't really notice workers. So whether I was inside or outside, people were always talking like I wasn't there. The biggest topic was Victor. Dangerous Victor Dashkov on the loose. How could it have happened? Did he have powers no one knew about? People were afraid, some even convinced he'd show up at Court and try to kill everyone in their sleep. The "inside job" theory was running rampant, which continued to keep us above suspicion. Unfortunately, it meant a lot of people now worried about traitors within our midst. Who knew who might be working for Victor Dashkov? Spies and rebels could be lurking at Court, planning all sorts of atrocities. I knew all the stories were exaggerated, but it didn't matter. They all came from one kernel of truth: Victor Dashkov was walking the world a free man. And only I—and my accomplices—knew it was all because of me.

Being seen in Las Vegas had continued to provide an alibi for the prison break and had made what we'd done seem even more rash. People were aghast that we'd let the Dragomir princess run off while there was a dangerous man on the loose—the man who'd assaulted her! Thank God, everyone said, that the queen had pulled us out of there before Victor found us. The Las Vegas trip had also opened up a whole new line of speculation—one that involved me personally.

"Well, that doesn't surprise me about Vasilisa," I overheard a woman say while I was working outdoors one day. She and some friends were strolling along toward the feeders' building and didn't even see me. "She's run away before, right? Those Dragomirs can be wild ones. She'll probably go straight back to the first party she can find, once they catch Victor Dashkov."

"You're wrong," her friend said. "That's not why she went. She's actually pretty levelheaded. It's that dhampir that's always with her—the Hathaway girl. I heard she and Adrian Ivashkov went to Las Vegas to elope. The queen's people just barely got there in time to stop them. Tatiana's furious, especially since Hathaway declared nothing will keep her and Adrian apart."

Whoa. That was kind of a shock. I mean, I guessed it was better for people to think Adrian and I were running off than for them to accuse me of aiding and abetting a fugitive, but still . . . I was kind of amazed at how that conclusion had come about. I hoped Tatiana hadn't heard about our so-called elopement. I was pretty sure that would ruin whatever progress she and I had made.

My first real social contact came in the form of an unlikely source. I was shoveling dirt into a raised flower bed and sweating like crazy. It was nearing bedtime for Moroi, meaning the sun was out in full summer glory. We at least had a pretty site while working: the Court's giant church.

I'd spent a lot of time at the Academy's chapel but had rarely visited this church since it was set far from the main buildings of the Court. It was Russian Orthodox—the predominant Moroi religion—and reminded me a lot of some of the cathedrals I'd seen while actually in Russia, though not nearly as big. It was made of beautiful red stonework, its towers topped with green-tiled domes, which were in turn topped with golden crosses.

Two gardens marked the far boundaries of the church's extensive grounds, one of which we were working on. Near us was one of the Court's most remarkable sites: a giant statue of some ancient Moroi queen that was almost ten times my height. A matching statue of a king stood on the opposite side of the grounds. I could never remember their names but was pretty sure we'd gone over them in one of my history classes. They'd been visionaries, changing the Moroi world of their time.

A figure appeared in my periphery, and I assumed it was Hans coming to give us another awful chore. Looking up, I was astonished to see it was Christian.

"Figures," I said. "You know you'll get in trouble if someone sees you talking to me."

Christian shrugged and sat on the edge of a partially completed stone wall. "Doubt it. You're the one who'll get into trouble, and I really don't think things can get any worse for you."

"True," I grunted.

He sat there in silence for several moments, watching me shovel pile after pile of dirt. Finally, he asked, "Okay. So how and *why* did you do it?"

"Do what?"

"You know exactly what. Your little adventure."

"We got on a plane and flew to Las Vegas. Why? Hmm. Let's think." I paused to wipe sweat off my forehead. "Because where else are we going to find pirate-themed hotels and bartenders who don't card very much?"

Christian scoffed. "Rose, don't bullshit me. You did not go to Las Vegas."

"We've got plane tickets and hotel receipts to prove it, not to mention people who saw the Dragomir princess hit it big on slot machines."

My attention was on my work, but I suspected Christian was shaking his

head in exasperation. “As soon as I heard three people had broken Victor Dashkov out of prison, I knew it had to be you. Three of you gone? No question.”

Not far away, I saw Eddie stiffen and glance around uneasily. I did the same. I might have been desperate for social contact, but not at the risk of dangerous parties overhearing us. Our crimes getting out would make garden labor seem like a vacation. We were alone, but I still pitched my voice low and attempted an honest face.

“I heard they were humans hired by Victor.” That was yet another theory running wild, as was this one: “Actually, I think he turned Strigoi.”

“Right,” Christian said snidely. He knew me too well to believe me. “And I also heard one of the guardians has no memory of what made him attack his friends. He swears he was under the control of someone. Anyone who had that kind of compulsion could probably make others see humans, mimes, kangaroos. . . .”

I refused to look at him and slammed the shovel hard into the ground. I bit my lip on any angry retort.

“She did it because she thinks Strigoi can be restored to their original form.”

My head shot up, and I stared at Eddie in disbelief, astonished he’d spoken. “What are you doing?”

“Telling the truth,” replied Eddie, never stopping his work. “He’s our friend. You think he’s going to report us?”

No, rebel Christian Ozera was not going to report us. But that didn’t mean I wanted this out. It’s a fact of life: The more people who know a secret, the more likely it is to leak.

Unsurprisingly, Christian’s reaction was not all that different from everyone else’s. “*What*? That’s impossible. Everyone knows that.”

“Not according to Victor Dashkov’s brother,” said Eddie.

“Will you stop it?” I exclaimed.

“You can tell him or I will.”

I sighed. Christian’s pale blue eyes were staring at us, wide and shocked. Like most of my friends, he rolled with crazy ideas, but this was pushing the crazy line.

“I thought Victor Dashkov was an only child,” Christian said.

I shook my head. “Nope. His dad had an affair, so Victor’s got an illegitimate half-brother. Robert. And he’s a spirit user.”

“Only you,” said Christian. “Only you would find something like this.”

I ignored what appeared to be a return to his normal cynicism. “Robert claims to have healed a Strigoi—killed the undead part of her and brought her back to life.”

“Spirit has limits, Rose. You might have been brought back, but Strigoi are *gone*.”

“We don’t know about spirit’s full range,” I pointed out. “Half of it is still a mystery.”

“We know about St. Vladimir. If he could restore Strigoi, don’t you think a guy like him would have been doing it? I mean, if that’s not miraculous, what is? Something like that would have survived in the legends,” argued Christian.

“Maybe. Maybe not.” I retied my ponytail, replaying our encounter with

Robert in my mind for the hundredth time. “Maybe Vlad didn’t know how. It’s not all that easy.”

“Yeah,” agreed Eddie. “This is the good part.”

“Hey,” I shot back at him. “I know you’re mad at me, but with Christian here, we really don’t need anyone else making snide comments.”

“I don’t know,” said Christian. “For something like this, you actually might need two people. Now explain how this miracle is supposedly done.”

I sighed. “By adding spirit to a stake, along with the other four elements.”

Spirit charms were still a new concept to Christian too. “Never thought of that. I guess spirit would shake things up . . . but I can’t imagine you staking a Strigoi with a spirit-charmed stake would be enough to bring them back.”

“Well . . . that’s the thing. According to Robert, *I* can’t do it. It has to be done by a spirit user.”

More silence. I’d rendered Christian speechless yet again.

At last he said, “We don’t know that many spirit users. Let alone any who could fight *or* stake a Strigoi.”

“We know two spirit users.” I frowned, recalling Oksana in Siberia and Avery locked away . . . where? A hospital? A place like Tarasov? “No, four. Five, counting Robert. But yeah, none of them can really do it.”

“It doesn’t matter because it can’t be done,” Eddie said.

“We don’t know that!” The desperation in my own voice startled me. “Robert believes it. Victor even believes.” I hesitated. “And Lissa does too.”

“And she wants to do it,” Christian said, catching on quickly. “Because she would do anything for you.”

“She can’t.”

“Because she doesn’t have the ability or because you won’t let her?”

“Both,” I cried. “I’m not letting her anywhere near a Strigoi. She’s already . . .” I groaned, hating to reveal what I’d discovered in our time apart through the bond. “She got a hold of a stake and is trying to charm it. So far, she hasn’t had much luck, thank God.”

“If this *were* possible,” began Christian slowly. “It could change our world. If she could learn . . . ”

“What? No!” I’d been so eager to get Christian to believe me, and now I wished he hadn’t. The one saving grace in all this was that with none of my friends thinking it was possible, none of them had given any thought to Lissa actually trying to fight a Strigoi. “Lissa’s no warrior. No spirit user we know is, so unless we find one, I’d rather . . . ” I winced. “I’d rather Dimitri died.”

That finally made Eddie stop working. He threw down his shovel. “Really? I never would have guessed that.” Sarcasm to rival my own.

I spun around and strode toward him, my fists clenched. “Look, I can’t take this anymore! I’m sorry. I don’t know what else to say. I know I screwed up. I let Dimitri get away. I let Victor get away.”

“You *let* Victor get away?” asked Christian, startled.

I ignored him and continued shouting at Eddie. “It was a mistake. With Dimitri . . . it was a weak moment. I failed in my training. I know I did. We both know it. But you know I didn’t intend the damage I caused. If you’re really my friend, you *have* to know it. If I could take it back . . .” I swallowed, surprised to feel my eyes burning. “I would. I swear I would, Eddie.”

His face was perfectly still. “I believe you. I am your friend, and I know . . . I know you didn’t mean for things to turn out like they did.”

I sagged in relief, surprised at how truly worried I’d been about losing his respect and friendship. Looking down, I was startled to see my fists balled up. I relaxed them, unable to believe I’d been that upset. “Thank you. Thank you so much.”

“What’s all this shouting?”

We both turned and saw Hans heading toward us. And he looked pissed off. I also noticed then that Christian had practically vanished into thin air. Just as well.

“This isn’t social time!” growled Hans. “You two still have another hour left today. If you’re going to get distracted, then maybe you should be separated.” He beckoned to Eddie. “Come on. There’s some filing with your name on it.”

I shot Eddie a sympathetic look as Hans led him away. Yet I was relieved it wasn’t me off to do paperwork.

I continued my labors, my mind spinning with the same questions I’d had all week. I had meant what I said to Eddie. I wanted so badly for this dream of Dimitri being saved to be true. I wanted it more than anything—except Lissa risking her life. I shouldn’t have hesitated. I should have just killed Dimitri. Victor wouldn’t have escaped. Lissa wouldn’t have given Robert’s words a second thought.

Thinking of Lissa pushed me into her mind. She was in her room, doing some last-minute packing before going to bed. Tomorrow was her Lehigh visit. Unsurprisingly, my invitation to go with her had been revoked in light of recent events. Her birthday—something that had been horribly overlooked in this mess—was this weekend as well, and it didn’t seem right for me to be apart from her during it. We should have been celebrating together. Her thoughts were troubled, and she was so consumed by them that a sudden knock at the door made her jump.

Wondering who could be visiting her at this hour, she opened the door and gasped to see Christian standing there. It was surreal to me too. Part of me still kept thinking we were in our school dorms, where rules—theoretically—kept guys and girls out of each other’s rooms. But we were no longer there. We were technically adults now. He must have gone straight to her room after seeing me, I realized.

It was astonishing how quickly the tension ratcheted up between them. A bundle of emotions burst into Lissa’s chest, the usual mix of anger, grief, and confusion.

“What are you doing here?” she demanded.

The same emotions were in his face. “I wanted to talk to you.”

“It’s late,” she said stiffly. “Besides, I seem to remember you don’t like talking.”

“I want to talk about what happened with Victor and Robert.”

That was enough to startle her out of her anger. She cast an anxious look into the hallway and then beckoned him inside. “How do you know about that?” she hissed, hastily shutting the door.

“I just saw Rose.”

“How did you get to see her? *I* can’t see her.” Lissa was as frustrated as me

over how our superiors had been keeping us apart.

Christian shrugged, careful to maintain a safe distance between them in the suite's small living room. Both of them had their arms crossed defensively, though I don't think they realized how they were mirroring each other. "I snuck into her prison camp. They've got her shoveling dirt for hours."

Lissa grimaced. With the way they'd kept us separated, she hadn't known much about my activities. "Poor Rose."

"She's managing. Like always." Christian's eyes turned toward the couch and her open suitcase, where a silver stake lay on top of a silk blouse. I doubted that shirt would survive the trip without a million wrinkles. "Interesting thing to bring on a college visit."

Lissa hastily shut the suitcase. "That's none of your business."

"Do you really believe it?" he asked, ignoring her comment. He took a step forward, his eagerness apparently making him forget about wanting to keep away. Even as distracted as she was by the situation, Lissa immediately became aware of their new proximity, the way he smelled, the way the light shone on his black hair. . . . "Do you think you could bring back a Strigoi?"

She turned her attention back to the conversation and shook her head. "I don't know. I really don't. But I feel like . . . I feel like I have to try. If nothing else, I want to know what spirit in a stake will do. That's harmless enough."

"Not according to Rose."

Lissa gave him a rueful smile, realized what she was doing, and promptly dropped it. "No. Rose doesn't want me going anywhere near this idea—even though she wants it to be real."

"Tell me the truth." His gaze burned to her. "Do you think you have any chance of staking a Strigoi?"

"No," she admitted. "I could barely throw a punch. But . . . like I said, I feel like I should try. I should try to learn. To stake one, I mean."

Christian pondered this for a few moments and then gestured toward the suitcase again. "You're going to Lehigh in the morning?"

Lissa nodded.

"And Rose got cut from the trip?"

"Of course."

"Did the queen offer to let you bring another friend?"

"She did," admitted Lissa. "In particular, she suggested Adrian. But he's sulking . . . and I'm not really sure if I'm in the mood for him."

Christian seemed pleased by this. "Then bring me."

My poor friends. I wasn't sure how much more shock any of them could handle today.

"Why the hell would I bring *you*?" she exclaimed. All her anger returned at his presumption. It was a sign of her agitation that she'd sworn.

"Because," he said, face calm, "I can teach you how to stake a Strigoi."

THIRTEEN

"THE HELL YOU CAN'T," I said aloud to no one.

"No, you can't," said Lissa, with an expression that matched my own incredulity. "I know you've been learning to fight with fire, but you haven't done any staking."

Christian's face was adamant. "I have—a little. And I can learn more. Mia's got some guardian friends here that have been teaching her physical combat, and I've learned some of it."

The mention of him and Mia working together didn't do much to improve Lissa's opinion. "You've barely been here a week! You make it sound like you've been training for years with some master."

"It's better than nothing," he said. "And where else are you going to learn? Rose?"

Lissa's outrage and disbelief dimmed a little. "No," she admitted. "Never. In fact, Rose would drag me away if she caught me doing it."

Damn straight I would. In fact, despite the obstacles and staff that kept blocking me, I was tempted to march over there right now.

"Then this is your chance," he said. His voice turned wry. "Look, I know things aren't . . . great with us, but that's irrelevant if you're going to learn this. Tell Tatiana you want to bring me to Lehigh. She won't like it, but she'll let you. I'll show you what I know in our free time. Then, when we get back, I'll take you to Mia and her friends."

Lissa frowned. "If Rose knew . . ."

"That's why we'll start when you're away from Court. She'll be too far away from you to do anything."

Oh, for the love of God. I would give them some lessons about fighting—starting with a punch to Christian's face.

"And when we get back?" asked Lissa. "She'll find out. It's inevitable with the bond."

He shrugged. "If she's still on landscape duty, we'll be able to get away with it. I mean, she'll know, but she won't be able to interfere. Much."

"It may not be enough," Lissa said with a sigh. "Rose was right about that—I can't expect to learn in a few weeks what it took her years to do."

Weeks? *That* was her timeline on this?

"You have to try," he said, almost gentle. Almost.

"Why are you so interested in this?" Lissa asked suspiciously. "Why do you care so much about bringing Dimitri back? I mean, I know you liked him, but you don't quite have the same motivation here that Rose does."

"He was a good guy," said Christian. "And if there was a way to turn him back to a dhampir? Yeah, that'd be amazing. But it's more than that . . . more than just him. If there was a way to save all Strigoi, that would change our world. I mean, not that setting them on fire isn't cool after they've gone on

killing sprees, but if we could stop those killing sprees in the first place? That's the key to saving us. All of us."

Lissa was speechless for a moment. Christian had spoken passionately, and there was a hope radiating off of him that she just hadn't expected. It was . . . moving.

He took advantage of her silence. "Besides, there's no telling what you'd do without any guidance. And I'd like to reduce the odds of you getting yourself killed, because even if Rose wants to deny it, I know you're going to keep pushing this."

Lissa stayed quiet yet again, pondering the situation. I listened to her thoughts, not liking at all where they were going.

"We're leaving at six," she said at last. "Can you meet me downstairs at five thirty?" Tatiana wouldn't be thrilled when she heard about the new guest choice, but Lissa was pretty sure she could do some fast talking in the morning.

He nodded. "I'll be there."

Back in my room, I was totally aghast. Lissa was going to attempt to learn to stake a Strigoi—*behind my back*—and she was going to get Christian to help her. Those two had been snarling at each other since the breakup. I should have felt flattered that sneaking around me was bringing them together, but I wasn't. I was pissed off.

I considered my options. The buildings Lissa and I were staying in didn't have the kind of front-desk curfew security that our school dorms had had, but the staff here had been instructed to tip off someone in the guardians' office if I got too social. Hans had also told me to stay away from Lissa until further notice. I pondered it all for a moment, thinking it might be worth Hans dragging me from Lissa's room, and then finally thought of an alternate plan. It was late but not *too* late, and I left my room for the one next door to mine. Knocking on the door, I hoped my neighbor was still awake.

She was a dhampir my age, a recent graduate from a different school. I didn't own a cell phone, but I'd seen her talking on one earlier today. She answered the door a few moments later and fortunately didn't appear to have been in bed.

"Hey," she said, understandably surprised.

"Hey, can I send a text from your phone?"

I didn't want to commandeer her phone with a conversation, and besides, Lissa might just hang up on me. My neighbor shrugged, stepped into the room, and returned with the phone. I had Lissa's number memorized and sent her the following note:

I know what you're going to do, and it is a BAD idea. I'm going to kick both your asses when I find you.

I handed the phone back to its owner. "Thanks. If anyone texts back, can you let me know?"

She told me she would, but I didn't expect any return texts. I got my message another way. When I returned to the room and Lissa's mind, I got to be there when her phone chimed. Christian had left, and she read my text with a rueful smile. My answer came through the link. She knew I was watching.

Sorry, Rose. It's a risk I'll have to take. I'm doing this.

* * *

I tossed and turned that night, still angry at what Lissa and Christian were trying to do. I didn't think I'd ever fall asleep, but when Adrian came to me in a dream, it became clear that my body's exhaustion had defeated my mind's agitation.

"Las Vegas?" I asked.

Adrian's dreams always occurred in different places of his choosing. Tonight, we stood on the Strip, very near where Eddie and I had rendezvoused with Lissa and him at the MGM Grand. The bright lights and neon of the hotels and restaurants gleamed in the blackness, but the whole setting was eerily silent compared to the reality. Adrian had not brought the cars or people of the real Las Vegas here. It was like a ghost town.

He smiled, leaning against a pole covered in paper ads for concerts and escort services. "Well, we didn't really get a chance to enjoy it while we were there."

"True." I stood a few feet away, arms crossed over my chest. I had on jeans and a T-shirt, along with my *nazar*. Adrian had apparently decided not to dress me tonight, for which I was grateful. I could have ended up like one of those Moroi showgirls, in feathers and sequins. "I thought you were avoiding me." I still wasn't entirely sure where our relationship stood, despite his flippant attitude back at the Witching Hour.

He snorted. "It's not by my choice, little dhampir. Those guardians are doing their best to keep you in solitary. Well, kind of."

"Christian managed to sneak in and talk to me earlier," I said, hoping to avoid the issue that had to be on Adrian's mind: that I'd risked lives to save my ex-boyfriend. "He's going to try to teach Lissa to stake a Strigoi."

I waited for Adrian to join in my outrage, but he appeared as lax and sardonic as usual. "Not surprised she's gonna try. What surprises me is that he'd actually be interested in helping with some crazy theory."

"Well, it's crazy enough to appeal to him . . . and can apparently overpower them hating each other lately."

Adrian tilted his head, making some of the hair fall over his eyes. A building with blue neon palm trees cast an eerie glow upon his face as he gave me a knowing look. "Come on, we both know why he's doing it."

"Because he thinks his after-school group with Jill and Mia qualifies him to teach that stuff?"

"Because it gives him an excuse to be around her—without making it look like he gave in first. That way, he can still seem manly."

I shifted slightly so that the lights of a giant sign advertising slot machines didn't shine in my eyes. "That's ridiculous." Especially the part about Christian being manly.

"Guys do ridiculous things for love." Adrian reached into his pocket and held up a pack of cigarettes. "Do you know how badly I want one of these right now? Yet I suffer, Rose. All for you."

“Don’t turn romantic on me,” I warned, trying to hide my smile. “We don’t have time for that, not when my best friend wants to go monster hunting.”

“Yeah, but how is she actually going to find him? That’s kind of a problem.” Adrian didn’t need to elaborate on the “him.”

“True,” I admitted.

“And she hasn’t been able to charm the stake yet anyway, so until she does, all the kung-fu skills in the world won’t matter.”

“Guardians don’t do kung-fu. And how did you know about the stake?”

“She’s asked for my help a couple of times,” he explained.

“Huh. I didn’t know that.”

“Well, you’ve been kind of busy. Not that you’ve even spared a thought for your poor pining boyfriend.”

With all my chores, I hadn’t spent a huge amount of time in Lissa’s head—just enough to check in with her. “Hey, I would have taken you over filing any day.” I’d been so afraid that Adrian would be furious with me after Vegas, yet here he was, light and playful. A little *too* light. I wanted him to focus on the problem at hand. “What’s your take on Lissa and the charms? Is she close to doing it?”

Adrian absentmindedly played with the cigarettes, and I was tempted to tell him to go ahead and have one. This was his dream, after all. “Unclear. I haven’t taken to charms the way she has. It’s weird having the other elements in there . . . makes it hard to manipulate spirit.”

“Are you helping her anyway?” I asked suspiciously.

He shook his head in amusement. “What do you think?”

I hesitated. “I . . . I don’t know. You help her with most spirit things, but helping her with this would mean . . .”

“. . . Helping Dimitri?”

I nodded, not trusting myself to elaborate.

“No,” Adrian said at last. “I’m not helping her, simply because I don’t know how.”

I exhaled with relief. “I really am sorry,” I told him. “For everything . . . for lying about where I was and what I was doing. It was wrong. And I don’t understand . . . well, I don’t get why you’re being so nice to me.”

“Should I be mean?” He winked. “Is that the kind of thing you’re into?”

“No! Of course not. But, I mean, you were so mad when you came to Vegas and found out what was going on. I just thought . . . I don’t know. I thought you hated me.”

The amusement faded from his features. He came over to me and rested his hands on my shoulders, his dark green eyes dead serious. “Rose, nothing in this world could make me hate you.”

“Not even trying to bring my ex-boyfriend back from the dead?”

Adrian held onto me, and even in a dream, I could smell his skin and cologne. “Yeah, I’ll be honest. If Belikov were walking around right now, alive like he used to be? There would be some problems. I don’t want to think what would happen with us if . . . well, it’s not worth wasting time on. He’s not here.”

“I still . . . I still want us to work,” I said meekly. “I would still try, even if he were back. I just have a hard time letting someone I care about go.”

"I know. You did what you did out of love. I can't be mad at you over that. It was stupid, but that's how love is. Do you have any idea what I'd do for you? To keep you safe?"

"Adrian . . ."

I couldn't meet his eyes. I suddenly felt unworthy. He was so easy to underestimate. The only thing I could do was lean my head against his chest and let him wrap his arms around me.

"I'm sorry."

"Be sorry you lied," he said, pressing a kiss to my forehead. "Don't be sorry you loved him. That's part of you, part you have to let go, yeah, but still something that's made you who you are."

Part you have to let go . . .

Adrian was right, and that was a damned scary thing to admit. I'd had my shot. I'd made my gamble to save Dimitri, and it had failed. Lissa wouldn't get anywhere with the stake, meaning I really did have to treat Dimitri the way everyone else did: He was dead. I had to move on.

"Damn it," I muttered.

"What?" asked Adrian.

"I hate it when you're the sane one. That's my job."

"Rose," he said, forcibly trying to keep a serious tone, "I can think of many words to describe you, *sexy* and *hot* being at the top of the list. You know what's not on the list? *Sane*."

I laughed. "Okay, well, then my job is to be the less crazy one."

He considered. "That I can accept."

I brought my lips up to his, and even if there were still some shaky things in our relationship, there was no uncertainty in how we kissed. Kissing in a dream felt exactly like real life. Heat blossomed between us, and I felt a thrill run through my whole body. He released my hands and wrapped his arms around my waist, bringing us closer. I realized that it was time to start believing what I kept saying. Life did go on. Dimitri might be gone, but I could have something with Adrian—at least until my job took me away. That was, of course, assuming I got one. Hell, if Hans kept me on desk duty here and Adrian continued his slothful ways, we could be together forever.

Adrian and I kissed for a long time, pressing closer and closer. At last I broke things off. If you had sex in a dream, did that mean you'd *really* done it? I didn't know, and I certainly wasn't going to find out. I wasn't ready for that yet.

I stepped back, and Adrian took the hint. "Find me when you get some freedom."

"Hopefully soon," I said. "The guardians can't punish me forever."

Adrian looked skeptical, but he let the dream dissolve without further comment. I returned to my own bed and my own dreams.

The only thing that stopped me from intercepting Lissa and Christian when they met up early in her lobby the next day was that Hans summoned me to work even earlier. He put me on paperwork duty—in the vaults, ironically enough—leaving me to file and stew over Lissa and Christian as I watched

them through my bond. I took it as a sign of my multitasking skills that I was able to alphabetize and spy at the same time.

Yet my observations were interrupted when a voice said, “Didn’t expect to find you here again.”

I blinked out of Lissa’s head and looked up from my paperwork. Mikhail stood before me. In light of the complications that had ensued with the Victor incident, I’d nearly forgotten Mikhail’s involvement in our “escape.” I set the files down and gave him a small smile.

“Yeah, weird how fate works, huh? They actually *want* me here now.”

“Indeed. You’re in a fair amount of trouble, I hear.”

My smile turned into a grimace. “Tell me about it.” I glanced around, even though I knew we were alone. “*You* didn’t get in any trouble, did you?”

He shook his head. “No one knows what I did.”

“Good.” At least one person had escaped this debacle unscathed. My guilt couldn’t have handled him getting caught too.

Mikhail knelt so that he was eye level with me, resting his arms on the table I sat at. “Were you successful? Was it worth it?”

“That’s a hard question to answer.”

He arched an eyebrow.

“There were some . . . not so successful things that happened. But we did find out what we wanted to know—or, well, we think we did.”

His breath caught. “How to restore a Strigoi?”

“I think so. If our informant was telling the truth, then yeah. Except, even if he was . . . well, it’s not that easy to do. It’s nearly impossible, really.”

“What is it?”

I hesitated. Mikhail had helped us, but he wasn’t in my circle of confidants. Yet even now, I saw that haunted look in his eyes, the one I’d seen before. The pain of losing his beloved still tormented him. It likely always would. Would I be doing more harm than good by telling him what I’d learned? Would this fleeting hope only hurt him more?

I finally decided to tell him. Even if he told others—and I didn’t think he would—most would laugh it off anyway. There would be no damage there. The real trouble would come if he told anyone about Victor and Robert—but I didn’t actually have to mention their involvement to him. Unlike Christian, it had apparently not occurred to Mikhail that the prison break so big in Moroi news had been pulled off by the teens he helped smuggle out. Mikhail probably couldn’t spare a thought for anything that didn’t involve saving his Sonya.

“It takes a spirit user,” I explained. “One with a spirit-charmed stake, and then he . . . or she . . . has to stake the Strigoi.”

“Spirit . . .” That element was still foreign to most Moroi and dhampirs—but not to him. “Like Sonya. I know spirit’s supposed to make them more alluring . . . but I swear, she never needed it. She was beautiful on her own.” As always, Mikhail’s face took on that same sad look it did whenever Ms. Karp was mentioned. I’d never really seen him truly happy since meeting him and thought he’d be pretty good-looking if he ever genuinely smiled. He suddenly seemed embarrassed at his romantic lapse and returned to business. “What spirit user could do a staking?”

"None," I said flatly. "Lissa Dragomir and Adrian Ivashkov are the only two spirit users I even know—well, aside from Avery Lazar." I was leaving Oksana and Robert out of this. "Neither of them has the skill to do it—you know that as well as I do. And Adrian has no interest in it anyway."

Mikhail was sharp, picking up on what I didn't say. "But Lissa does?"

"Yes," I admitted. "But it would take her years to learn to do it. If not longer. And she's the last of her line. She can't be risked like that."

The truth of my words hit him, and I couldn't help but share his pain and disappointment. Like me, he'd put a lot of faith into this last-ditch effort to be reunited with his lost love. I had just affirmed that it was possible . . . yet impossible. I think it would have been easier on both of us to learn it had all been a hoax.

He sighed and stood up. "Well . . . I appreciate you going after this. Sorry your punishment is for nothing."

I shrugged. "It's okay. It was worth it."

"I hope . . ." His face turned hesitant. "I hope it ends soon and doesn't affect anything."

"Affect what?" I asked sharply, catching the edge in his voice.

"Just . . . well, guardians who disobey orders sometimes face long punishments."

"Oh. This." He was referring to my constant fear of being stuck with a desk job. I tried to play flippant and not to show how much that possibility scared me. "I'm sure Hans was bluffing. I mean, would he really make me do this forever just because I ran away and—"

I stopped, my mouth hanging open when a knowing glint flashed in Mikhail's eyes. I'd heard long ago how he'd tried to track down Ms. Karp, but the logistics had never really hit me until now. No one would have condoned his search. He would have had to leave on his own, breaking protocol, and come skulking back when he finally gave up on locating her. He would have been in just as much trouble as me for going MIA.

"Is that . . ." I swallowed. "Is that why you . . . why you work down here in the vaults now?"

Mikhail didn't answer my question. Instead, he glanced down with a small smile and pointed at my stacks of paper. "*F* comes before *L*," he said before turning and leaving.

"Damn," I muttered, looking down. He was right. Apparently I couldn't alphabetize so well while watching Lissa. Still, once I was alone, that didn't stop me from tuning back into her mind. I wanted to know what she was doing . . . and I didn't want to think about how what I'd done would probably be considered worse than Mikhail's deeds in the eyes of the guardians. Or that a similar—or worse—punishment might be in store for me.

Lissa and Christian were at a hotel near Lehigh's campus. The middle of the vampiric day meant evening for the human university. Lissa's tour wouldn't start until their morning the next day, which meant she had to bide her time at the hotel now and try to adjust to a human schedule.

Lissa's "new" guardians, Serena and Grant, were with her, along with three extras that the queen had sent as well. Tatiana had allowed Christian to come along and hadn't been nearly as opposed as Lissa had feared—which again

made me question if the queen really was as awful as I'd always believed. Priscilla Voda, a close advisor of the queen that both Lissa and I liked, was also accompanying Lissa as she looked around the school. Two of the additional guardians stayed with Priscilla; the third stayed with Christian. They ate dinner as a group and then retired to their rooms. Serena was actually staying with Lissa in hers while Grant stood guard outside the door. Watching all this triggered a pang in me. Pair guarding—it was what I'd been trained for. What I'd been expecting my whole life to do for Lissa.

Serena was a picture-perfect example of guardian aloofness, being there but not there as Lissa hung up some of her clothes. A knock at the door immediately shot Serena into action. Her stake was in hand, and she strode to the door, looking out through its peephole. I couldn't help but admire her reaction time, though part of me would never believe anyone could guard Lissa as well as I could. "Get back," Serena said to Lissa.

A moment later, the tension in Serena faded a tiny bit, and she opened the door. Grant stood there with Christian beside him.

"He's here to see you," Grant said, like it wasn't obvious.

Lissa nodded. "Um, yeah. Come on in."

Christian stepped inside when Grant backed away. Christian gave Lissa a meaningful look as he did, making a small head nod toward Serena.

"Hey, um, would you mind giving us some privacy?" As soon as the words were out of Lissa's mouth, she turned bright pink. "I mean . . . we just . . . we just need to talk about some things, that's all."

Serena kept her face *almost* neutral, but it was clear she thought they were going to do more than talk. Average teen dating wasn't usually hot gossip in the Moroi world, but Lissa, with her notoriety, attracted a bit more attention with her romantic affairs. Serena would have known Christian and Lissa had gone out and broken up. For all she knew, they were back together now. Lissa inviting him on this trip certainly suggested it.

Serena glanced around warily. The balance of protection and privacy was always difficult with Moroi and guardians, and hotel rooms like this made it even harder. If they were on a vampiric schedule, with everyone sleeping during daylight hours, I didn't doubt Serena would have stepped into the hall with Grant. But it was dark outside, and even a fifth-floor window could be a Strigoi liability. Serena wasn't keen on leaving her new charge alone.

Lissa's hotel suite had an expansive living room and work area, with an adjacent bedroom accessible through frosted-glass French doors. Serena nodded toward them. "How about I just go in there?" A smart idea. Provided privacy but kept her close by. Then, Serena realized the implications, and *she* blushed. "I mean . . . unless you guys want to go in there and I'll—"

"No," exclaimed Lissa, growing more and more embarrassed. "This is fine. We'll stay in here. We're just *talking*."

I wasn't sure whose benefit that was for, Serena's or Christian's. Serena nodded and disappeared into the bedroom with a book, which reminded me eerily of Dimitri. She shut the door. Lissa wasn't sure how well noise traveled, so she turned the TV on.

"God, that was miserable," she groaned.

Christian seemed totally at ease as he leaned against the wall. He wasn't the

formal type by any means, but he'd put on dress clothes for dinner earlier and still wore them. They looked good on him, no matter how much he always complained. "Why?"

"Because she thinks we're—she thinks we're—well, you know."

"So? What's the big deal?"

Lissa rolled her eyes. "You're a guy. Of course it doesn't matter to you."

"Hey, it's not like we *haven't*. Besides, better for her to think that than to know the truth."

The reference to their past sex life inspired a mix of emotions—embarrassment, anger, and longing—but she refused to let that show. "Fine. Let's just get this over with. We've got a big day, and our sleep's going to be all screwy as it is. Where do we start? Do you want me to get the stake?"

"No need yet. We should just practice some basic defensive moves." He straightened up and moved toward the center of the room, dragging a table out of the way.

I swear, if not for the context, watching the two of them attempt combat training on their own would have been hilarious.

"Okay," he said. "So you already know how to punch."

"What? I do not!"

He frowned. "You knocked out Reed Lazar. Rose mentioned it, like, a hundred times. I've never heard her so proud about something."

"I punched *one* person *once* in my life," she pointed out. "And Rose was coaching me. I don't know if I could do it again."

Christian nodded, looking disappointed—not in her skills but because he had an impatient nature and wanted to jump right into the really hard-core fighting stuff. Nonetheless, he proved a surprisingly patient teacher as he went over the fine art of punching and hitting. A lot of his moves were actually things he'd picked up from me.

He'd been a decent student. Was he at guardian levels? No. Not by a long shot. And Lissa? She was smart and competent, but she wasn't wired for combat, no matter how badly she wanted to help with this. Punching Reed Lazar had been a beautiful thing, but it didn't appear to be anything that would ever become natural for her. Fortunately, Christian started with simple dodging and watching one's opponent. Lissa was just a beginner at it but showed a lot of promise. Christian seemed to chalk it up to his instructive skills, but I'd always thought spirit users had a kind of preternatural instinct about what others might do next. I doubted it would work on Strigoi, though.

After a little of that, Christian finally returned to offense, and that's when things went bad.

Lissa's gentle, healing nature didn't mesh with that, and she refused to really strike out with her full force, for fear of hurting him. When he realized what was happening, his snarky temper started to rise.

"Come on! Don't hold back."

"I'm not," she protested, delivering a punch to his chest that didn't come close to budging him.

He raked a hand irritably through his hair. "You are too! I've seen you knock on a door harder than you're hitting me."

"That's a ridiculous metaphor."

“And,” he added, “you aren’t aiming for my face.”

“I don’t want to leave a mark!”

“Well, at the rate we’re going, there’s no danger of that,” he muttered. “Besides, you can heal it away.”

I was amused at their bickering but didn’t like his casual encouragement of spirit use. I still hadn’t shaken my guilt over the long-term damage that the prison break could have caused.

Reaching forward, Christian grabbed her by the wrist and jerked her toward him. He balled her fingers with his other hand and then slowly demonstrated how to swing a punch upward by pulling her fist toward his face. He was more interested in showing the technique and motion, so it only brushed against him.

“See? Arc upward. Make the impact right there. Don’t worry about hurting me.”

“It’s not that simple. . . .”

Her protest died off, and suddenly, they both seemed to notice the situation they were in. There was barely any space between them, and his fingers were still wrapped around her wrist. They felt warm against Lissa’s skin and were sending electricity through the rest of her body. The air between them seemed thick and heavy, like it might just wrap them up and pull them together. From the widening of Christian’s eyes and sudden intake of breath, I was willing to bet he was having a similar reaction at being so close to her body.

Coming to himself, he abruptly released her hand and stepped back. “Well,” he said roughly, though still clearly unnerved by the proximity, “I guess you aren’t really serious about helping Rose.”

That did it. Sexual tension notwithstanding, anger kindled up in Lissa at the comment. She balled her fist and totally caught Christian off guard when she swung out and socked him in the face. It didn’t have the grace of her Reed punch, but it took Christian hard. Unfortunately, she lost her balance in the maneuver and stumbled forward into him. The two of them went down together, hitting the floor and knocking over a small table and lamp nearby. The lamp caught the table’s corner and broke.

Meanwhile, Lissa had landed on Christian. His arms instinctively went out around her, and if the space between them before had been small, it was nonexistent now. They stared into each other’s eyes, and Lissa’s heart was pounding fiercely in her chest. That tantalizing electric feeling crackled around them again, and all the world for her seemed to focus on his lips. Both she and I wondered later if they might have kissed, but just then, Serena came bursting out of the bedroom.

She was on guardian high alert, body tense and ready to face an army of Strigoi with her stake in hand. She came screeching to a halt when she saw the scene before her: what appeared to be a romantic interlude. Admittedly, it was an odd one, what with the broken lamp and swelling red mark on Christian’s face. It was pretty awkward for everyone, and Serena’s attack mode faded to one of confusion.

“Oh,” she said uncertainly. “Sorry.”

Embarrassment flooded Lissa, as well as self-resentment at being affected so much by Christian. She was furious at him, after all. Hastily, she pulled away

and sat up, and in her flustered state, she felt the need to make it clear that there was nothing romantic whatsoever going on.

"It . . . it's not what you think," she stuttered, looking anywhere except at Christian, who was getting to his feet and seemed just as mortified as Lissa. "We were fighting. I mean, practicing fighting. I want to learn to defend against Strigoi. And attack them. And stake them. So Christian was kind of helping me, that's all." There was something cute about her rambling, and it reminded me charmingly of Jill.

Serena visibly relaxed, and while she'd mastered that blank face all guardians excelled at, it was clear she was amused. "Well," she said, "it doesn't look like you're doing a very good job."

Christian turned indignant as he stroked his injured cheek. "Hey! We are too. I taught her this."

Serena still thought it was all funny, but a serious, considering glint was starting to form in her eyes. "That seems like it was more lucky than anything else." She hesitated, like she was on the verge of a big decision. At last she said, "Look, if you guys are serious about this, then you need to learn to do it the right way. I'll show you how."

No. Way.

I was seriously on the verge of escaping the Court and hitchhiking to Lehigh to *really* show them how to throw a punch—with Serena as my example—when something jolted me away from Lissa and back into my own reality. Hans.

I had a sarcastic greeting on my lips, but he didn't give me a chance. "Forget the filing and follow me. You've been summoned."

"I—what?" Highly unexpected. "Summoned where?"

His face was grim. "To see the queen."

FOURTEEN

THE LAST TIME TATIANA HAD wanted to yell at me, she'd simply taken me to one of her private sitting rooms. It had made for a weird atmosphere, like we were at teatime—except people didn't usually scream at other people during teatime. I had no reason to believe this would be any different . . . until I noticed my escort was leading me to the main business buildings of the Court, the places where all royal governing was conducted. Shit. This was more serious than I'd thought.

And indeed, when I was finally ushered into the room where Tatiana waited . . . well, I nearly came to a standstill and couldn't enter. Only a slight touch on my back from one of the guardians with me kept me moving forward. The place was packed.

I didn't know for sure which room I was in. The Moroi actually kept a bona fide throne room for their king or queen, but I didn't think this was it. This room was still heavily decorated, conveying an old-world royal feel, with painstakingly carved floral molding and shining gold candleholders on the walls. There were actually lit candles in them too. Their light reflected off the metallic decorations in the room. Everything glittered, and I felt like I'd stumbled into a stage production.

And really, I might as well have. Because after a moment's surveying, I realized where I was. The people in the room were split. Twelve of them sat at a long table on a dais at what was clearly meant to be the focal point of the room. Tatiana herself sat at the middle of the table, with six Moroi on one side and five Moroi on the other. The other side of the room was simply set with rows of chairs—still elaborate and padded with satin cushions—which were also filled with Moroi. The audience.

The people sitting on either side of Tatiana were the tip-off. They were older Moroi, but ones who carried a regal air. Eleven Moroi for the eleven acting royal families. Lissa was not eighteen—though she was about to be, I realized with a start—and therefore had no spot yet. Someone was sitting in for Priscilla Voda. I was looking at the Council, the princes and princesses of the Moroi world. The oldest member of each family claimed the royal title and an advisory spot beside Tatiana. Sometimes the eldest waived the spot and gave it to someone the family felt was more capable, but the selectee was almost always at least forty-five. The Council elected the Moroi king or queen, a position held until death or retirement. In rare circumstances, with enough backing from the royal families, a monarch could be forcibly removed from office.

Each prince or princess on the Council was in turn advised by a family council, and glancing back at the audience, I recognized clusters of family members sitting together: Ivashkovs, Lazars, Badicas . . . The very back rows appeared to be observers. Tasha and Adrian sat together, and I knew for a fact

they weren't members of the Royal Council or family councils. Still, seeing them set me at ease a little.

I remained near the entrance to the room, shifting uneasily from foot to foot, wondering what was in store. I hadn't just earned public humiliation; I'd apparently earned it in front of the most important Moroi in the world. Wonderful.

A gangly Moroi with patchy white hair stepped forward, around the side of the long table, and cleared his throat. Immediately, the hum of conversation died. Silence filled the room.

"This session of the Moroi Royal Council is now in order," he declared. "Her Royal Majesty, Tatiana Marina Ivashkov, is presiding." He gave a slight bow in her direction and then discreetly backed off to the side of the room, standing near some guardians who lined the walls like decorations themselves.

Tatiana always dressed up at the parties I saw her at, but for a formal event like this, she was really channeling the queen look. Her dress was long-sleeved navy silk, and a glittering crown of blue and white stones sat atop her elaborately braided hair. In a beauty pageant, I would have written such gems off as rhinestones. On her, I didn't question for a moment that they were real sapphires and diamonds.

"Thank you," she said. She was also using her royal voice, resonant and impressive, filling the room. "We will be continuing our conversation from yesterday."

Wait . . . what? They'd been discussing me *yesterday* too? I noticed then that I'd wrapped my arms around myself in a sort of protective stance and immediately dropped them. I didn't want to look weak, no matter what they had in store for me.

"Today we will be hearing testimony from a newly made guardian." Tatiana's sharp gaze fell on me. The whole room's did. "Rosemarie Hathaway, will you please come forward?"

I did, keeping my head high and posture confident. I didn't exactly know where to stand, so I picked the middle of the room, directly facing Tatiana. If I was going to be paraded in public, I wished someone would have tipped me off to wear guardian black and white. Whatever. I'd show no fear, even in jeans and a T-shirt. I gave a small, proper bow and then met her eyes directly, bracing for what was to come.

"Will you please state your name?" she asked.

She'd already done it for me, but I still said, "Rosemarie Hathaway."

"How old are you?"

"Eighteen?"

"And how long have you been eighteen?"

"A few months."

She waited a couple moments to let it sink in, as though this were important information. "Miss Hathaway, we understand that around that time, you withdrew from St. Vladimir's Academy. Is this correct?"

That's what this was about? Not the Vegas trip with Lissa?

"Yes." I offered no more info. Oh God. I hoped she didn't get into Dimitri. She shouldn't have known about my relationship with him, but there was no telling what information could spread around here.

"You went to Russia to hunt Strigoi."

"Yes."

"As a type of personal revenge following the attack at St. Vladimir 's?"

"Er . . . yes."

No one said anything, but my response definitely caused a stir in the room. People shifted uneasily and glanced at their neighbors. Strigoi always inspired fear, and someone actively seeking them out was still an unusual concept among us. Oddly, Tatiana seemed very pleased by this confirmation. Was it going to be used as more ammunition against me?

"We would assume then," she continued, "that you are one of those who believe in direct strikes against the Strigoi?"

"Yes."

"Many had different reactions to the terrible attack at St. Vladimir's," she said. "You aren't the only dhampir who wanted to strike back against the Strigoi—though you were certainly the youngest."

I hadn't known about others going on vigilante sprees—well, aside from some reckless dhampirs in Russia. If that was the story about my trip she was willing to believe, that was fine with me.

"We have reports from both guardians and Alchemists in Russia that you were successful." This was the first time I'd heard the Alchemists mentioned in public, but of course they'd be a common topic among the Council. "Can you tell me how many you killed?"

"I . . ." I stared in surprise. "I'm not sure, Your Majesty. At least . . ." I racked my brain. "Seven." It might have been more. She thought so too.

"That might be a modest estimate compared to what our sources say," she noted grandly. "Nonetheless, still an impressive number. Did you perform the kills by yourself?"

"Sometimes I did. Sometimes I had help. There were . . . some other dhampirs I worked with once in a while." Technically, I'd had Strigoi help as well, but I wasn't going to mention that.

"They were close to your age?"

"Yes."

Tatiana said no more, and as though receiving a cue, a woman beside her spoke up. I believed she was the Conta princess.

"When did you kill your first Strigoi?"

I frowned. "Last December."

"And you were seventeen?"

"Yes."

"Did you perform that kill yourself?"

"Well . . . mostly. A couple friends helped with distraction." I hoped they weren't going to push for more details. My first kill had occurred when Mason had died, and aside from the events surrounding Dimitri, that memory tormented me the most.

But Princess Conta didn't want too many other details. She and the others—who soon joined in the questioning—mostly wanted to know about my kills. They were slightly interested in knowing when other dhampirs had helped me—but didn't want to go into when I'd had Moroi help. They also glossed over my disciplinary record, which I found baffling. The rest of my academic

details were mentioned—my exceptional combat grades, how I'd been one of the best when Lissa and I had run away our sophomore year and how quickly I'd made up for lost time to become top in my class again (at least as far as fighting went). They talked also about how I'd protected Lissa whenever we were out in the world alone and finally concluded with my exceptional trial scores.

"Thank you, Guardian Hathaway. You may leave."

Tatiana's dismissive voice left no room for doubt. She wanted me out of there. I was only too eager to comply, giving another bow, and then scurrying out. I cast a quick glance at Tasha and Adrian as I did, and the queen's voice rang out as I cleared the door, "That concludes our session today. We will convene again tomorrow."

I wasn't surprised when Adrian caught up with me a few minutes later. Hans hadn't ordered me to come back and work after the session, so I had decided to read that as freedom.

"Okay," I said, slipping my hand into Adrian's. "Enlighten me with your royal political wisdom. What was that all about?"

"No clue. I'm the last person to ask about political stuff," he said. "I don't even go to those things, but Tasha found me at the last minute and said to come with her. I guess she got a tip-off you'd be there—but she was just as confused."

Neither of us had said anything, but I realized I was leading him toward one of the buildings that housed commerce—restaurants, shops, etc. I was starving all of a sudden.

"I got the impression this was part of something they'd already been talking about—she mentioned their last session."

"It was closed. Like tomorrow's. No one knows what they're discussing."

"Then why make this one public?" It didn't seem fair that the queen and Council could pick and choose what they shared with others. Everything should have been public.

He frowned. "Probably because they're going to hold a vote soon, and that'll be public. If your testimony plays some role, then the Council may want to make sure other Moroi witnessed it—so that everyone understands the decision when it comes." He paused. "But what do I know? I'm no politician."

"Makes it sound like it's already decided," I grumbled. "Why have a vote at all? And why would *I* have anything to do with government?"

He opened the door to a small café that sold light lunch food—burgers and sandwiches. Adrian had been raised with fancy restaurants and gourmet food. I think he preferred that, but he also knew I didn't like always being on display *or* being reminded that I was with a royal from an elite family. I appreciated that he'd known I'd just want something ordinary today.

Nonetheless, our being together earned us a few curious glances and whispers from the diner's patrons. At the school, we'd been a source of speculation, but here at Court? We were a main-stage attraction. Images were important at Court, and most dhampir-Moroi relationships were carried out in secret. Us being so open—especially considering Adrian's connections—was scandalous and shocking, and people weren't always discreet with their reactions. I'd heard all sorts of things since returning to Court. One woman

had called me shameless. Another had speculated aloud why Tatiana hadn't simply "dealt with me."

Fortunately, most of our audience was content to stare today, making them easy to ignore. There was a small line of thought on Adrian's forehead as we sat down at a table. "Maybe they're voting to make you Lissa's guardian after all."

I was so astonished that I couldn't say anything for several seconds when the waitress suddenly appeared. I finally stammered out my order and then stared at Adrian with wide eyes.

"Seriously?" The session had been an examination of my skills, after all. It made sense. Except . . . "No. The Council wouldn't go to the trouble of holding sessions for one guardian assignment." My hopes fell.

Adrian gave a shrug of acknowledgment. "True. But this isn't an ordinary guardian assignment. Lissa's the last of her line. Everyone—including my aunt—has a special interest in her. Giving her someone like you who's . . ." I gave him a dangerous look as he grasped for a word. ". . . Controversial could upset some people."

"And that's why they actually wanted *me* there to describe what I've done. To convince people in person that I'm competent." Even as I spoke the words, I still didn't dare believe them. It was too good to be true. "I just can't imagine it, seeing as I seem to be in so much trouble with the guardians."

"I don't know," he said. "It's just a guess. Who knows? Maybe they do think the Las Vegas thing was just a harmless prank." There was a bitter tone in his voice over that. "And I told you that Aunt Tatiana was coming around to you. Maybe she wants you as Lissa's guardian now but needs to make a public display to justify it."

That was a startling thought. "But if I do get to come with Lissa, what are you going to do? Get respectable and come to college too?"

"I don't know," he said, green eyes thoughtful as he sipped his drink. "Maybe I will."

That was also unexpected, and my conversation with his mother returned to my mind. What if I was Lissa's guardian in college and he was with us for the next four years? I was fairly certain Daniella had thought we'd be splitting up this summer. I'd thought so too . . . and was surprised to feel how relieved I was that I might get to stay with him. Dimitri always left my heart full of pain and longing, but I still wanted Adrian in my life.

I grinned at him and rested my hand on his. "I'm not sure what I'd do with you if you were respectable."

He lifted my hand to his lips and kissed it. "I've got some suggestions," he told me. I didn't know if it was his words or the feel of his mouth on my skin that sent shivers through me. I was about to ask what those suggestions were when our interlude was interrupted . . . by Hans.

"Hathaway," he said, one eyebrow arched as he stood over us. "You and I have some very different ideas about the definition of 'punishment.'"

He had a point. In my mind, punishment involved easy things like lashings and starvation. Not filing.

Instead, I replied, "You didn't tell me to come back after I saw the queen."

He gave me an exasperated look. "I *also* didn't tell you to go off on a

playdate. Come on. Back to the vaults."

"But I have a BLT coming!"

"You'll get your lunch break in another couple hours like the rest of us."

I tried to repress my outrage. They hadn't been feeding me bread crusts and water during my work detail, but the food hadn't tasted much better. Just then, the waitress returned with our food. I grabbed the sandwich before she even set the plates down and wrapped it in a napkin. "Can I take it to go?"

"If you can eat it before we get back." His voice was skeptical, seeing as the vault was pretty close. Clearly, he was underestimating my ability to consume food.

In spite of Hans's disapproving expression, I gave Adrian a kiss goodbye and a look that told him maybe we'd continue our conversation. He gave me a happy, knowing smile that I only saw for a second before Hans ordered me away. True to my expectations, I managed to get the sandwich down before we arrived back at the guardians' building, though I did feel a little nauseous for the next half hour or so.

My lunchtime was almost dinnertime for Lissa, out in the human world. Returning to my miserable punishment, I cheered up a little at the joy running through her via our bond. She'd spent the whole day on her campus tour of Lehigh, and it was everything she'd hoped it could be. She loved it all. She loved the beautiful buildings, the grounds, the dorms . . . and especially the classes. A glimpse at the course catalog opened up a world of subjects that even St. Vladimir's superior education hadn't offered us. She wanted to see and do everything that the school had to offer.

And even though she wished I was there, she was still excited about the fact that it was her birthday. Priscilla had given her some elaborate jewelry and had promised a fancy dinner that night. It wasn't exactly the type of celebration Lissa had hoped for, but the thrill of her eighteenth birthday was still intoxicating—particularly as she looked around at the dream school she'd be attending soon.

I confess, I felt a pang of jealousy. Despite Adrian's theory about why the queen had called me in today, I knew—as did Lissa—that the odds of me going to college with her were still probably nonexistent. Some petty part of me couldn't understand how Lissa could therefore be excited about it if I wasn't going to be along. Childish of me, I know.

I didn't have long to sulk, though, because once all the touring was done, Lissa's entourage returned to the hotel. Priscilla told them they could clean up for an hour or so before heading to dinner. For Lissa, this meant more fighting-practice time. My brooding mood immediately turned irate.

Things got worse when I realized that earlier in the day, Serena had told Grant about Lissa and Christian's desire to defend themselves. He apparently thought that it was a good idea too. It would figure. Lissa had two progressive guardians. Why couldn't she have gotten some stodgy, old-school person who would be horrified at the thought of a Moroi even *thinking* about fighting off a Strigoi?

So, while I sat helpless and unable to smack sense into any of them, Lissa and Christian now had *two* instructors. Not only did this mean more learning opportunities, it also meant Serena had a competent partner to demonstrate

certain moves with. She and Grant sparred, explaining maneuvers while Lissa and Christian watched wide-eyed.

Fortunately (well, not for Lissa), she and I soon noticed something. The guardians didn't know the true reason Lissa was interested in fighting. They had no idea—how could they have?—that she wanted to go hunt and stake a Strigoi in the feeble hope of bringing him back to life. They thought she just wanted to learn basic defense, something that seemed very sensible to them. So that was what they taught.

Grant and Serena also made Lissa and Christian practice on each other. I suspected there were a couple reasons for this. One was that Lissa and Christian didn't have the skill to do much damage to each other. The second reason was that it amused the guardians.

It did *not* amuse Lissa and Christian. There was still so much tension between them, both sexual and angry, that they resented being in such close contact. Grant and Serena stopped the two Moroi from doing any more face punching, but simple dodges often meant brushing against each other, fingers sliding against skin in the heat of the action. Every once in a while, the guardians would have someone play Strigoi—putting Lissa or Christian on the offensive. The two Moroi welcomed this to a certain extent; after all, direct attacks were what they wanted to learn.

But, when Christian (playing Strigoi) lunged at Lissa and pushed her into a wall, learning offense suddenly didn't seem like such a good idea to her. The maneuver pressed them right up to each other, his arms holding hers. She could smell him and feel him and was overwhelmed by the fantasy of him just holding her there and kissing her.

"I think you two should go back to basic defense," said Grant, interrupting her traitorous feelings. He sounded like he was more worried about them hurting each other than the possibility that they might start making out.

It took Lissa and Christian a moment to even register his words, let alone part from each other. When they did, both avoided eye contact and returned to the couch. The guardians launched into more examples of how to avoid an attacker. Lissa and Christian had seen this so many times that they knew the lesson by heart, and their earlier attraction gave way to frustration.

Lissa was too polite to say anything, but after fifteen minutes of Serena and Grant showing how to block with your arms and dodge someone reaching for you, Christian finally spoke. "How do you stake a Strigoi?"

Serena froze at Christian's words. "Did you say *stake*?"

Rather than being shocked, Grant chuckled. "I don't think that's anything you need to worry about. You want to focus on getting *away* from a Strigoi, not getting closer."

Lissa and Christian exchanged an uneasy look.

"I helped kill Strigoi before," Christian pointed out. "I used fire at the school's attack. Are you saying that's not okay? That I shouldn't have done it?"

Now Serena and Grant traded glances. *Ha*, I thought. Those two weren't as progressive as I thought. They were coming from a defense point of view, not offense.

"Of course you should have," said Grant at last. "What you did was amazing. And in a similar situation? Sure. You wouldn't want to be helpless.

But that's the point—you have your fire. If it came down to you fighting a Strigoi, your magic's going to be the way to go. You already know how to use it—and it'll keep you safely out of their range."

"What about me?" asked Lissa. "I don't have any kind of magic like that."

"You'll never get close enough to a Strigoi for it to be a problem," said Serena fiercely. "We won't let you."

"Besides," added Grant with amusement, "it's not like we just go around handing out stakes." I would have given anything for them to go take a look in her suitcase right then.

Lissa bit her lip and refused to make eye contact with Christian again, for fear of giving away their intentions. This was not going according to their crazy plan. Christian again took the lead.

"Can you at least demo it?" he asked, trying—and succeeding—to look like someone just seeking the sensational and exciting. "Is it hard to do? It seems like all you have to do is aim and hit."

Grant snorted. "Hardly. There's a bit more to it than that."

Lissa leaned forward, clasping her hands together as she followed Christian's lead. "Well, then don't worry about teaching us. Just show us."

"Yeah. Let's see." Christian shifted restlessly beside her. As he did, their arms brushed, and instantly they moved apart.

"It's not a game," Grant said. Nonetheless, he walked over to his coat and produced his stake. Serena stared incredulously.

"What are you going to do?" she asked. "Stake *me*?"

He gave that small chuckle of his and searched the room with his sharp eyes. "Of course not. Ah. There we are." He walked over to a small armchair that had a decorative pillow. He lifted it up and tested its width. It was fat and thickly filled with some sort of dense stuffing. He returned to Lissa and gestured for her to stand. To everyone's astonishment, he handed her his stake.

Locking his body into a rigid position, he gripped the pillow hard between his hands and extended it out a couple feet in front of him. "Go ahead," he said. "Aim and hit it."

"Are you crazy?" asked Serena.

"Don't worry," he said. "Princess Voda can afford the incidentals. I'm proving a point. Strike the pillow."

Lissa hesitated only a few more moments. An excitement that seemed unusually intense filled her. I knew she'd been anxious to learn this, but her desire for it seemed higher than before. Gritting her teeth, she stepped forward and awkwardly tried to impale the pillow with her stake. She was cautious—fearing she'd hurt Grant—but there was no need for her to worry. She didn't even budge him, and all she managed with the stake was a slight snagging of the fabric on the surface. She tried a few more times but achieved little more.

Christian, being who he was, said, "That's all you can do?"

Glaring, she handed him the stake. "You do better."

Christian stood, snarky smile disappearing as he studied the pillow critically and sized up his blow. As he did, Lissa glanced around and saw the humor in the guardians' eyes. Even Serena had relaxed. They were making their point,

proving staking wasn't an easy thing to learn. I was glad, and my opinion of them rose.

Christian finally made his move. He did actually pierce the fabric, but the pillow and its stuffing proved too much to break through. And again, Grant wasn't shaken at all. After more failed attempts, Christian sat down again and handed the stake back. It was kind of fun to see Christian's cocky attitude shot down a little. Even Lissa enjoyed it, despite her own frustration over how difficult this was becoming.

"The stuffing's got too much resistance," Christian complained.

Grant handed his stake to Serena. "What, and you think a Strigoi's body is going to be easier to get through? With muscles and ribs in the way?"

Grant got back into his position, and without hesitation, Serena struck with the stake. Its point burst through the other side of the pillow, coming to a halt just in front of Grant's chest as tiny fluffy pieces of stuffing drifted to the ground. She jerked it out and handed it to him like it had been the simplest thing in the world.

Both Christian and Lissa stared in amazement. "Let me try again," he said.

By the time Priscilla called them to dinner, there wasn't a pillow in that hotel room left untouched. Boy, she was going to be surprised when she got the bill. Lissa and Christian hacked away with the stake while the guardians looked on with a superior air, confident their message was being delivered. Staking Strigoi was not easy.

Lissa was finally getting it. She realized that in some ways, piercing a pillow —or a Strigoi—wasn't even about understanding the principle. Sure, she'd heard me talk about lining your shot up to get to the heart and miss the ribs, but this was more than knowledge. A lot of it was strength—strength she physically didn't have yet. Serena, though seemingly petite, had spent years building up her muscle and could get that stake through practically anything. One hour-long lesson wouldn't give Lissa that kind of strength, and she whispered as much to Christian when the group went out to dinner.

"You're quitting already?" he asked, voice equally low as they rode in the backseat of an SUV. Grant, Serena, and a third guardian were there too, but they were deep in discussion.

"No!" Lissa hissed back. "But I've got to, like, train before I can do it."

"Like lift weights?"

"I . . . I don't know." The others were still talking to each other, but Lissa's topic was too dangerous for her to risk them hearing. She leaned close to Christian, unnerved yet again at how his closeness and familiarity affected her. Swallowing, she tried to keep her face impassive and stick to the topic. "But I'm just not strong enough. It's physically impossible."

"Sounds like you're giving up."

"Hey! You didn't make it through any of the pillows either."

He flushed slightly. "I almost got through that green one."

"There was hardly anything in it!"

"I just need more practice."

"You don't need to do anything," she shot back, fighting to keep her voice quiet through her anger. "This isn't your fight. It's mine."

"Hey," he snapped, eyes glittering like pale blue diamonds, "you're crazy if

you think I'm going to just let you go and risk—"

He cut himself off and actually bit his lip, as though will alone wasn't enough to stop him from talking. Lissa stared at him, and both of us began wondering how he would have finished. What wouldn't he risk? Her putting herself in danger? That was my guess.

Even without talk, he spoke volumes with his expression. Through Lissa's eyes, I saw him drinking in her features and trying to hide his emotions. At last, he jerked away and broke that intimate space between them, getting as far from her as he could.

"Fine. Do whatever you want. I don't care."

Neither of them spoke after that, and since it was lunchtime for me, I returned to my own reality and welcomed a filing break—only to be informed by Hans that I had to keep working.

"Come on! Isn't it lunchtime? You have to feed me," I exclaimed. "That's just beyond cruel. At least throw me some crumbs."

"I did feed you. Or, well, you fed yourself when you inhaled that sandwich. You wanted your lunch break then. You got it. Now you keep working."

I slammed my fists against the endless piles of paper before me. "Can't I at least do something else? Paint buildings? Haul rocks?"

"I'm afraid not." A smile twisted the corners of his lips. "There's a lot of filing we need done."

"How long? How long are you going to punish me?"

Hans shrugged. "Until someone tells me to stop."

He left me alone again, and I leaned back in my chair, forcibly trying not to flip the table in front of me over. I thought it would make me feel momentarily better, but it also meant I'd have to redo the work I'd done. With a sigh, I returned to my task.

Lissa was at dinner when I tuned back into her later. It might have technically been in honor of her birthday, but really, it was all royal conversation with Priscilla. That was no way to spend a birthday, I decided. I'd have to make this up to her whenever I earned freedom. We'd have a real party, and I'd be able to give her my birthday present: gorgeous leather boots that Adrian had helped me acquire back at school.

Being in Christian's head might have been more interesting, but since that wasn't an option, I returned to my own and mulled over my earlier talk with Adrian. Was this punishment finally going to end? Was an official royal decree going to put me and Lissa together at last, despite the guardians' normal policy?

Trying to figure it out was like being on a hamster wheel. A lot of work. No progress. But it got me through the dinner conversation, and before I knew it, Lissa's group was getting up and heading for the restaurant's door. It was dark out now, and Lissa couldn't help but feel the weirdness of being on a human schedule. Back at school or the Court, this would be the middle of the day. Instead, they were now heading back to their hotel and would be going to bed. Well, probably not right away. I had no doubt that if Lissa and Christian could get over their current huff, they'd be back to stabbing more pillows. As much as I wanted those two dating again, I couldn't help but think they were a lot safer apart.

Or maybe not.

The group had hung out at the restaurant far past the normal dinner hour, so the lot was mostly empty as they walked across it. The guardians hadn't exactly parked in the back, but they weren't near the main entrance either. They had, however, made a point of parking next to one of the street lamps illuminating the lot.

Except it wasn't lit now. The light had been broken.

Grant and Priscilla's guardian noticed it right away. It was the kind of little detail we were trained to notice: anything unusual, anything that might have changed. In a flash, the two of them had stakes out and were flanking the Moroi. It only took seconds for Serena and the guardian assigned to Christian to follow suit. That was something else we were trained to do. Be on guard. React. Follow your colleagues.

They were fast. All of them were fast. But it didn't matter.

Because suddenly, there were Strigoi everywhere.

I'm not entirely sure where they came from. Maybe they'd been behind the cars or on the parking lot's edges. If I'd had a bird-eye's view of the situation or been there myself with my "nausea alarm," I might have had a better sense of it all. But I was watching the scene through Lissa's eyes, and the guardians were going out of their way to block her from the Strigoi who seemed to have appeared out of thin air as far as she was concerned. Most of the actions were a blur to her. Her bodyguards were shoving her around, trying to keep her safe as white, red-eyed faces popped up everywhere. She saw it all through a fear-filled haze.

But before long, both of us could see people dying. Serena, just as fast and strong as she'd been in the hotel room, staked a male Strigoi cleanly through the heart. Then, in return, a female Strigoi leapt at Priscilla's guardian and broke his neck. Lissa was distantly aware of Christian's arm around her, pressing her against the SUV and shielding her with his own body. The remaining guardians were also still forming a protective ring as best they could, but they were distracted. Their circle was faltering—and they were dropping.

One by one, the Strigoi killed the guardians. It wasn't for lack of skill on the guardians' part. They were simply outnumbered. One Strigoi tore out Grant's throat with her teeth. Serena was backhanded hard against the asphalt, landing facedown and not moving. And, horror of horrors, the Strigoi didn't seem to be sparing Moroi either. Lissa—pushing so hard against the SUV that it seemed as though she might become one with it—stared wide-eyed as one Strigoi swiftly and efficiently ripped into Priscilla's neck, pausing to drink her blood. The Moroi woman didn't even have time to register surprise, but at least there had been no real suffering. The endorphins dimmed the pain as the blood and life were drained from her body.

Lissa's emotions shifted into something beyond fear, something that hardly felt like anything at all. She was in shock. Numbed. And with a cold, hard certainty, she knew that her death was coming and accepted it. Her hand found Christian's, squeezing it tightly, and turning toward him, she took small comfort in knowing the last sight she would see in life was the beautiful, crystalline blue of his eyes. From the look on his face, his thoughts were along

similar themes. There was warmth in his eyes, warmth and love and—

Total and complete astonishment.

His eyes widened, focusing on something just behind Lissa. At that same moment, a hand grabbed Lissa's shoulder and whipped her around. *This is it*, a small voice inside her whispered. *This is where I die*.

Then, she understood Christian's astonishment.

She was facing Dimitri.

Like me, she had that surreal sense of it being Dimitri yet not being Dimitri. So many of his features were the same . . . and yet so many were different. She tried to say something, anything, but while the words formed on her lips, she just couldn't manage to get them out.

Intense heat suddenly flared behind her, and a brilliant light lit Dimitri's pale features. Neither Lissa nor I needed to see Christian to know he had produced a ball of fire with his magic. Either the shock of seeing Dimitri or fear for Lissa had spurred Christian into action. Dimitri squinted slightly at the light, but then a cruel smile twisted his lips, and the hand resting on her shoulder slid up to her neck.

"Put it out," said Dimitri. "Put it out or she dies."

Lissa finally found her voice, even with her air cut off. "Don't listen to him," she gasped out. "He's going to kill us anyway."

But behind her, the heat died. Shadows fell across Dimitri's face once again. Christian wouldn't risk her, even though she was right. It hardly seemed to matter.

"Actually," said Dimitri, voice pleasant amid the grim scene, "I'd rather you two stay alive. At least for a little while longer."

I felt Lissa's face move to a frown. I wouldn't have been surprised if Christian's did too, judging from the confusion in his voice. He couldn't even manage a snarky comment. He could only ask the obvious: "Why?"

Dimitri's eyes gleamed. "Because I need you to be bait for Rose."

FIFTEEN

IN MY PANICKED MIND, RIGHT then, getting up and running on foot to Lehigh—despite it being miles and miles away—seemed like a totally solid plan. A heartbeat later, I knew this was out of my league. Way, way out of my league.

As I shot up from my table and tore out of the room, I felt a sudden longing for Alberta. I'd seen her jump into action at St. Vladimir's and knew she could take charge of any situation. At this point in our relationship, she would respond to any threat I brought to her. The guardians at Court were still strangers to me. Who could I go to? Hans? The guy who hated me? He wouldn't believe me, not like Alberta or my mother would. Running down the quiet hallways, I dismissed all such worries. It didn't matter. I would make him believe. I would find anyone I could. Anyone who could get Lissa and Christian out of this.

Only you can, a voice hissed in my head. *You're the one Dimitri wants.*

I ignored that thought too, largely because in my distraction, I collided into someone rounding a corner.

I gave a muffled cry that sounded like "Oomph" as my face slammed into someone's chest. I looked up. Mikhail. I would have been relieved, except I was too pumped full of adrenaline and worry. I grabbed his sleeve and began tugging him toward the stairs.

"Come on! We have to get help!"

Mikhail remained were he was, not budging against my pull. He frowned, face calm. "What are you talking about?"

"Lissa! Lissa and Christian. They've been taken by Strigoi—by Dimitri. We can find them. I can find them. But we have to hurry."

Mikhail's confusion grew. "Rose . . . how long have you been down here?"

I didn't have time for this. Leaving him, I fled up the stairs to the main levels of the complex. A moment later I heard his footsteps behind me. When I reached the main office, I expected someone to chastise me for leaving my punishment, except . . . no one seemed to even notice me.

The office was in chaos. Guardians were running around, calls were being made, and voices rose to frantic levels. They knew, I realized. They already knew.

"Hans!" I called, pushing my way through the crowd. He was on the other side of the room and had just hung up on a cell call. "Hans, I know where they are. Where the Strigoi took Lissa and Christian."

"Hathaway, I don't have time for your—" His scowl faltered. "You have that bond."

I stared in astonishment. I'd been ready for him to dismiss me as a nuisance. I'd been ready for a long fight to convince him. I gave him a hasty nod.

"I saw it. I saw everything that happened." Now I frowned. "How do you

know already?"

"Serena," he said grimly.

"Serena's dead . . ."

He shook his head. "No, not yet. Though she certainly sounded like it on the phone. Whatever happened, it took everything she had to make that call. We have Alchemists coming to get her, and . . . clean up."

I replayed the events, remembering how Serena had been slammed against the asphalt. It had been a hard blow, and when she didn't move, I'd assumed the worst. Yet if she'd survived—and apparently she must have—I could just barely form a mental image of her dragging her cell phone out of her pocket with bloody hands. . . .

Please, please let her be alive, I thought, not sure who I was praying to.

"Come on," said Hans. "We need you. There are teams already forming."

There was another surprise. I hadn't expected him to bring me on so quickly. A new respect for Hans settled over me. He might act like an asshole, but he was a leader. When he saw an asset, he used it. In one swift motion, he was hurrying out the door, several guardians following him. I struggled to keep up with their longer strides and saw Mikhail coming as well.

"You're doing a rescue," I told Hans. "That's . . . rare." I hesitated to even speak the words. I certainly didn't want to discourage this. But Moroi rescues weren't normal. When Strigoi took them, they were often regarded as dead. The rescue we'd done after the Academy attack had been an oddity, one that had taken a lot of persuasion.

Hans gave me a wry look. "So is the Dragomir princess."

Lissa was precious to me, worth more than anything else in the world. And for the Moroi, I realized, she was precious too. Most Moroi captured by Strigoi might be regarded as dead, but she wasn't most Moroi. She was the last in her line, the last of one of twelve ancient families. Losing her wouldn't just be a hit to Moroi culture. It would be a sign, an omen that the Strigoi were truly defeating us. For her, the guardians would risk a rescue mission.

In fact, it appeared they would risk a lot of things. As we arrived at the garages where the Court's vehicles were stored, I saw masses of other guardians arriving—along with Moroi. I recognized a few. Tasha Ozera was among them, and like her, the others were fire users. If we'd learned anything, it was how valuable they were in a fight. It appeared the controversy of Moroi going to battle was being ignored right now, and I was amazed at how quickly this group had been summoned. Tasha's eyes met mine, her face grave and drawn. She said nothing to me. She didn't need to.

Hans was barking orders, splitting people into groups and vehicles. With every bit of self-control I could muster, I waited patiently near him. My restless nature made me want to jump in and start demanding to know what I could do. He would get to me, I assured myself. He had a role for me; I just had to wait.

My self-control was also being tested with Lissa. After Dimitri had taken her and Christian away, I'd left her mind. I couldn't go back, not yet. I couldn't stand to see them—to see Dimitri. I knew I'd have to once I began directing the guardians, but for now, I held off. I knew Lissa was alive. That was all that mattered for the time being.

Still, I was so wound up and filled with tension that when someone touched my arm, I nearly turned on them with my stake.

"Adrian . . ." I breathed. "What are you doing here?"

He stood there looking down at me, and his hand gently brushed my cheek. I had only ever seen such a serious, grim look on his face a couple of times. As usual, I didn't like it. Adrian was one of those people who should always be smiling.

"As soon as I heard the news, I knew where you'd be."

I shook my head. "It happened like . . . I don't know, ten minutes ago?" Time had blurred for me. "How could everyone know so soon?"

"It was radioed across the Court as soon as they found out. They've got an instant alert system. In fact, the queen's kind of in lockdown."

"What? Why?" Somehow that annoyed me. Tatiana wasn't the one in danger. "Why waste resources on *her*?" A nearby guardian gave me a critical look over that.

Adrian shrugged. "Strigoi attack relatively close by? They take it as a pretty serious security threat for us."

Relatively was the key word. Lehigh was about an hour and a half from Court. Guardians were always on alert, though with each passing second, I wished they'd move faster *and* be on alert. If Adrian hadn't shown up, I was pretty sure I would have lost my patience and told Hans to hurry.

"It's Dimitri," I said in a low voice. I hadn't been sure if I should tell anyone else that. "He's the one who took them. He's using them to lure me there."

Adrian's face grew darker. "Rose, you can't . . ." He trailed off, but I knew his meaning.

"What choice do I have?" I exclaimed. "I have to go. She's my best friend, and I'm the only one who can lead them to her."

"It's a trap."

"I know. And he knows I know."

"What will you do?" Again, I knew exactly what Adrian meant.

I glanced down at the stake I'd unconsciously pulled out earlier. "What I have to. I have to . . . I have to kill him."

"Good," said Adrian, relief flooding his features. "I'm glad."

For some reason, that irritated me. "God," I snapped. "Are you that eager to get rid of any competition?"

Adrian's face stayed serious. "No. I just know that as long as he's still alive—or, well, kind of alive—then you're in danger. And I can't stand that. I can't stand knowing that your life is in the balance. And it is, Rose. You'll never be safe until he's gone. I want you safe. I *need* you to be safe. I can't . . . I can't have anything happen to you."

My flare of anger vanished as quickly as it had come. "Oh, Adrian, I'm sorry. . . ."

I let him draw me into his arms. Resting my head against his chest, I felt his heartbeat and the softness of his shirt, I allowed myself a brief and fleeting moment of comfort. I just wanted to sink into him then and there. I didn't want to be consumed by these feelings of fear: fear for Lissa and fear *of* Dimitri. I went cold all over as a sudden realization slipped over me. No matter what happened, I would lose one of them tonight. If we rescued Lissa,

Dimitri would die. If he survived, she would die. There was no happy ending for this story, nothing that could save my heart from being crushed into pieces.

Adrian brushed my forehead with his lips and then leaned down toward my mouth. “Be careful, Rose. No matter what happens, please, *please* be careful. I can’t lose you.”

I didn’t know what to say to that, how to respond to all that emotion pouring from him. My own mind and heart were flooded with so many mixed feelings that I could barely form a coherent thought. Instead, I drew my lips to his and kissed him. In the midst of all the death tonight—the death that already had happened and that which was still to come—that kiss seemed more powerful than any he and I had ever shared. It was alive. I was alive, and I wanted to stay that way. I wanted to bring Lissa back, and I wanted to return to Adrian’s arms again, return to his lips and all this life. . . .

“Hathaway! Good God, do I need to hose you down?”

I broke abruptly from Adrian and saw Hans glaring at me. Most of the SUVs were loaded up. Now it was my turn to act. I gave Adrian a look of farewell, and he forced a small smile that I think was supposed to be brave.

“Be careful,” he repeated. “Bring them back—and bring yourself back too.”

I gave him a quick nod and then followed an impatient Hans into one of the SUVs. The most bizarre sense of déjà vu settled over me as I slid into the backseat. This was so like the time Victor had kidnapped Lissa that I nearly froze up. Then, too, I had ridden in a similar black SUV, directing guardians toward Lissa’s location. Only it had been Dimitri sitting beside me—the wonderful, brave Dimitri I’d known so long ago. Yet those memories were so etched into my mind and heart that I could picture every detail: the way he’d tucked his hair behind his ears, the fierce look in his brown eyes as he’d stepped on the gas to get us to Lissa faster. He’d been so determined, so ready to do what was right.

This Dimitri—Dimitri the Strigoi—was also determined. But in a very different way.

“You gonna be able to do this?” asked Hans from the front seat. A hand gently squeezed my arm, and I was startled to see Tasha beside me. I hadn’t even noticed she was riding with us. “We’re counting on you.”

I nodded, wanting to be worthy of his respect. In best guardian fashion, I kept my emotions off my face, trying not to feel that conflict between the two Dimitris. Trying not to remember that the night we’d gone after Lissa and Victor had been the same night Dimitri and I had fallen prey to the lust charm. . . .

“Head toward Lehigh,” I said in a cool voice. I was a guardian now. “I’ll direct you when we get closer.”

We’d only been on the road for about twenty minutes when I sensed Lissa’s group coming to a halt. Dimitri had apparently chosen a hideout not too far from the university, which would make it easier for us to find than if they’d kept moving. Of course, I had to remind myself that Dimitri *wanted* to be found. Knowing that the guardians with me wouldn’t need my directions until we were closer to Lehigh, I steeled myself and jumped into Lissa’s head to see what was going on.

Lissa and Christian hadn't been harmed or attacked, aside from being pushed and dragged around. They sat in what looked like a storage room—a storage room that hadn't been used in a very long time. Dust coated everything in a heavy layer, so much that it was hard to make out some of the objects piled on the rickety shelves. Some tools, maybe. Paper here and there, as well as the occasional box. A bare lightbulb was the only light in the room, giving everything a harsh and dingy feel.

Lissa and Christian sat in straight-backed wooden chairs, their hands bound behind their backs with rope. For a moment, déjà vu hit again. I remembered last winter when I too, along with my friends, had been bound to chairs and held captive by Strigoi. They'd drunk from Eddie, and Mason had died. . . .

No. Don't think like that, Rose. Lissa and Christian are alive. Nothing's happened to them yet. Nothing will *happen to them.*

Lissa's mind was on the here and now, but a little probing let me see what the overall building had looked like when she'd been brought in. It had seemed to be a warehouse—an old, abandoned one—which made it a nice place for the Strigoi to hole up with their prisoners.

There were four Strigoi in the room, but as far as Lissa was concerned, only one really mattered. Dimitri. I understood her reaction. Seeing him as a Strigoi had been hard for me. Surreal, even. I'd adapted somewhat, simply because of all the time I'd spent with him. Still, even I was caught by surprise sometimes at seeing him like that. Lissa hadn't been prepared at all and was in total shock.

Dimitri's dark brown hair was worn loose around his chin today, a look I'd always loved on him, and he was pacing rapidly, causing his duster to swirl around him. A lot of the time, his back was to Lissa and Christian, which made it that much more troubling for her. Without seeing his face, she could almost believe it was the Dimitri she'd always known. He was arguing with the other three as he walked back and forth across the small space, agitation radiating off him in an almost palpable wave.

"If the guardians really are coming," snarled one Strigoi, "then we should be posted outside." She was a tall, gangly redhead who appeared to have been Moroi when turned. Her tone implied that she did *not* think guardians were actually coming, though.

"They're coming," said Dimitri in a low voice, that lovely accent making my heart ache. "I know they are."

"Then let me get out there and be useful!" she snapped. "You don't need us to babysit these two." Her tone was dismissive. Scornful, even. It was understandable. Everyone in the vampire world knew Moroi didn't fight back, and Lissa and Christian were firmly bound.

"You don't know them," said Dimitri. "They're dangerous. I'm not even sure this is enough protection."

"That's ridiculous!"

In one smooth motion, Dimitri turned and backhanded her. The hit knocked her back a few feet, her eyes widening in fury and shock. He resumed his pacing as though nothing had happened.

"You will stay here, and you will guard them as long as I tell you to, do you understand?" She glared back and gingerly touched her face but said nothing.

Dimitri glanced at the others. “And you’ll stay too. If the guardians actually make it this far inside, you’ll be needed for more than just guard duty.”

“How do you know?” demanded another Strigoi, a black-haired one who might have been human once. A rarity among Strigoi. “How do you know they’ll come?”

Strigoi had amazing hearing, but with their bickering, Lissa had a brief opportunity to speak undetected to Christian. “Can you burn my ropes?” she murmured in a nearly inaudible voice. “Like with Rose?”

Christian frowned. When he and I had been captured, it was what he’d done to free me. It had hurt like hell and left blisters on my hands and wrists. “They’ll notice,” he breathed back. The conversation went no further because Dimitri came to an abrupt halt and turned toward Lissa.

She gasped at the sudden and unexpected movement. Swiftly approaching her, he knelt down before her and peered into her eyes. She trembled in spite of her best efforts. She had never been this close to a Strigoi, and the fact that it was Dimitri was that much worse. The red rings around his pupils seemed to burn into her. His fangs looked poised to attack.

His hand snaked out and gripped her neck, tilting her face up so he could get an even better look into her eyes. His fingers dug into her skin, not enough to cut off her air but enough that she would have bruises later. If there was a later.

“I know the guardians will come because Rose is watching,” said Dimitri. “Aren’t you, Rose?” Loosening his hold a little, he ran his fingertips over the skin of Lissa’s throat, so gently . . . yet there was no question he had the power to snap her neck.

It was like he was looking into *my* eyes at the moment. My soul. I even felt like he was stroking *my* neck. I knew it was impossible. The bond existed between Lissa and me. No one else could see it. Yet, just then, it was like no one else existed but *him* and me. It was like there was no Lissa between us.

“You’re in there, Rose.” A pitiless half smile played over his mouth. “And you won’t abandon either of them. You also aren’t foolish enough to come alone, are you? Maybe once you would have—but not anymore.”

I jerked out of her head, unable to stare into those eyes—and see them staring back at me. Whether it was my own fear or a mirroring of Lissa’s, I discovered my body was also trembling. I forced it to stop and tried to slow my racing heart. Swallowing, I glanced around to see if anyone had noticed, but they were all preoccupied with discussing strategy—except for Tasha.

Her cool blue gaze studied me, her face drawn with concern. “What did you see?”

I shook my head, unable to look at her either. “A nightmare,” I murmured. “My worst nightmare coming true.”

SIXTEEN

I DIDN'T HAVE A PRECISE count of how many Strigoi were with Dimitri's group. So much of what I'd seen through Lissa had been blurred with confusion and terror. The guardians, knowing we were expected, had simply had to make a best guess about how many to send. Hans had hoped overwhelming force would make up for us losing the element of surprise. He'd dispatched as many guardians as he could reasonably clear from the Court. Admittedly, the Court was protected by wards, but it still couldn't be left entirely undefended.

Having the new grads there had helped. Most of them had been left behind, allowing the seasoned guardians to go on our hunting party. That left us with forty or so. It was as unusual as large groups of Strigoi banding together. Guardians were usually sent out in pairs, maybe groups of three at most, with Moroi families. This large of a force had the potential to bring about a battle rivaling that of the Academy attack.

Knowing that sneaking through the dark wouldn't work, Hans stopped our convoy a little ways from the warehouse the Strigoi were holed up at. The building was situated on a service road cutting off from the highway. It was an industrial area, hardly a deserted path in the woods, but all the businesses and factories were shut down this late at night. I stepped out of the SUV, letting the warm evening wrap around me. It was humid, and the moisture in the air felt especially oppressive when I was already smothered with fear.

Standing beside the road, I felt no nausea. Dimitri hadn't posted Strigoi this far, which meant our arrival was still—kind of—a surprise. Hans walked over to me, and I gave him the best estimate I could on the situation, based on my limited information.

"But you can find Vasilisa?" he asked.

I nodded. "As soon as I'm in the building, the bond will lead me straight to her."

He turned, staring off into the night as cars sped by on the nearby highway. "If they're already waiting outside, they'll smell and hear us long before we see them." Passing headlights briefly illuminated his face, which was lined in thought. "You said there are three layers of Strigoi?"

"As far as I could tell. There are some on Lissa and Christian, then some outside." I paused, trying to think what Dimitri would do in this situation. Surely I knew him well enough, even as a Strigoi, to calculate his strategy. "Then another layer inside the building—before you get to the storage room." I didn't know this for certain, but I didn't tell Hans. The assumption was made on my own instincts, drawn from what I would do and what I thought Dimitri would do. I figured it would be best if Hans planned for three waves of Strigoi.

And that's exactly what he did. "Then we go in with three groups. You'll lead the group going in for the extraction. Another team will accompany yours

and eventually split off. They'll fight whoever's right inside, letting your group head for the captives."

It sounded so . . . militaristic. *Extraction. Captives.* And me . . . a team leader. It made sense with the bond, but always in the past, they'd simply used my knowledge and left me on the sidelines. *Welcome to being a guardian, Rose.* At school, we'd conducted all sorts of exercises, running as many different Strigoi scenarios as our instructors could dream up. Yet, as I stared up at the warehouse, all of those drills seemed like playacting, a game that could in no way measure up to what I was about to face. For half a second, the responsibility of it all seemed daunting, but I quickly shoved aside such concerns. This was what I had been trained to do, what I had been born to do. My own fears didn't matter. *They come first.* Time to prove it.

"What are we going to do since we can't sneak up on them?" I asked. Hans had a point about the Strigoi detecting us in advance.

An almost mischievous smile flickered on his face, and he explained his plan to the group while also dividing us into our teams. His approach tactic was bold and reckless. My kind of plan.

And like that, we were off. An outsider analyzing us might have said we were on a suicide mission. Maybe we were. It honestly didn't matter. The guardians wouldn't abandon the last Dragomir. And I wouldn't have abandoned Lissa even if there were a million Dragomirs.

So, with sneaking having been ruled out, Hans opted for a full-on attack. Our group loaded back into the eight SUVs and tore off down the street at illegal speeds. We took up the entire width of the road, gambling on no oncoming traffic. Two SUVs led the charge side by side, then two rows of three. We shot to the end of the road, came to a halt with screeching tires at the front of the warehouse, and spilled out of our cars. If slow stealth wasn't an option, we'd gain surprise by going fast and furious.

Some of the Strigoi were indeed surprised. Clearly, they'd seen our approach, but it had happened so fast that they'd had only a little time to react. Of course, when you were as fast and deadly as Strigoi, a little time was all you needed. A group of them surged at us, and Hans's "outside team" charged back, those guardians putting themselves between my group and the other going inside. The Moroi fire users had been assigned to the outside group, for fear of setting the building on fire if they went inside.

My team moved around the battle, inevitably running into a few Strigoi who hadn't fallen to the first team's distraction. With well-practiced determination, I ignored the nausea sweeping through me from being this close to Strigoi. Hans had strictly ordered me not to stop unless any Strigoi were directly in my path, and he and another guardian were beside me to cover any threats that might come at me. He wanted nothing to delay me from leading them to Lissa and Christian.

We fought our way into the warehouse, entering a dingy hall blocked by Strigoi. I'd been right in my guess that Dimitri would have layers of security. A bottleneck formed in the small space, and for a few moments things were chaotic. Lissa was so close. It was like she was calling to me, and I burned with impatience as I waited for the hall to clear. My team was in the back, letting the other group do the fighting. I saw Strigoi and guardians alike fall

and tried not to let it distract me. Fight now, grieve later. Lissa and Christian. I had to focus on them.

"There," said Hans, tugging my arm. A gap had formed ahead of us. There were still plenty of Strigoi, but they were distracted enough that my companions and I slipped through. We took off down the hall, which opened into a large empty space that made up the warehouse's heart. A few pieces of trash and debris were all that was left of the goods once stored here.

Doors led off of the room, but now I didn't need the bond to tell me where Lissa was. Three Strigoi stood guard outside a doorway. So. Four layers of security. Dimitri had one-upped me. It didn't matter. My group had ten people. The Strigoi snarled, bracing in anticipation as we charged them. Through an unspoken signal, half of my group engaged them. The rest of us busted down the door.

Despite my intense focus on reaching Lissa and Christian, one tiny thought had always been dancing in the back of my brain. Dimitri. I hadn't seen Dimitri in any of the Strigoi we'd encountered. With my full attention on our attackers, I hadn't slipped into Lissa's head to verify the situation, but I felt totally confident that he was still inside the room. He would have stayed with her, knowing I would come. He would be waiting to face me.

One of them dies tonight. Lissa or Dimitri.

Having reached our goal, I no longer needed extra protection. Hans pulled out his stake on the first Strigoi he encountered, pushing past me and jumping into the fray. The rest of my group did likewise. We poured into the room, and if I thought there'd been chaos earlier, it was nothing compared to what we faced. All of us—guardians and Strigoi—just barely fit inside the room, which meant we were fighting in very, very close quarters. A female Strigoi—the one Dimitri had slapped earlier—came at me. I fought on autopilot, barely aware of my stake piercing her heart. In this room, full of shouting and death and colliding, there were only three people in the world that mattered to me now: Lissa, Christian, and Dimitri.

I'd found him at last. Dimitri was with my two friends against the far wall. No one was fighting him. He stood with arms crossed, a king surveying his kingdom as his soldiers battled the enemy. His eyes fell on me, his expression amused and expectant. This was where it would end. We both knew it. I shoved my way through the crowd, dodging Strigoi. My colleagues pushed into the fray beside me, dispatching whom-ever stood in my way. I left them to their fight, moving toward my objective. All of this, everything happening, had led to this moment: the final showdown between Dimitri and me.

"You're beautiful in battle," said Dimitri. His cold voice carried to me clearly, even above the roar of combat. "Like an avenging angel come to deliver the justice of heaven."

"Funny," I said, shifting my hold on the stake. "That *is* kind of why I'm here."

"Angels fall, Rose."

I'd almost reached him. Through the bond, I felt a brief surge of pain from Lissa. A burning. No one was harming her yet, but when I saw her arms move out of the corner of my eye, I realized what had happened. Christian had done what she'd asked: He'd burned her ropes. I saw her move to untie him in

return, and then my attention shifted back to Dimitri. If Lissa and Christian were free, then so much the better. It would make their escape easier, once we cleared out the Strigoi. *If* we cleared out the Strigoi.

"You've gone to a lot of trouble to get me here," I told Dimitri. "A lot of people are going to die—yours and mine."

He shrugged, unconcerned. I was almost there. In front of me, a guardian battled a bald Strigoi. That lack of hair was *not* attractive with his chalk white skin. I moved around them.

"It doesn't matter," said Dimitri. He tensed as I approached. "None of them matter. If they die, then they obviously aren't worthy."

"Prey and predator," I murmured, recalling what he'd said to me while holding me prisoner.

I'd reached him. No one stood between us now. This was different from our past fights, where we'd had lots of room to size each other up and plan our attacks. We were still crammed into the room, and in keeping our distance from the others, we'd closed the gap between us. That was a disadvantage for me. Strigoi outmatched guardians physically; extra room helped us compensate with more maneuverability.

I didn't need to maneuver quite yet, though. Dimitri was trying to wait me out, wanting me to make the first move. He kept a good position, though, one that blocked me from getting a clear shot on his heart. I could do some damage if I cut him elsewhere with the stake, but he would likely get a hit in on me that would be packed with power in this proximity. So I tried to wait him out as well.

"All this death is because of you, you know," he said. "If you'd let me awaken you . . . let us be together . . . well, none of this would have happened. We'd still be in Russia, in each other's arms, and all of your friends here would be safe. None of them would have died. It's your fault."

"And what about the people I'd have to kill in Russia?" I demanded. He'd shifted his weight a little. Was that an opening? "They wouldn't be safe if I—"

A crashing sound off to my left startled me. Christian, now freed, had just slammed his chair into a Strigoi engaged with a guardian. The Strigoi shrugged Christian off like a fly. Christian flew backward, slamming into a wall and landing on the floor with a slightly stunned look. In spite of myself, I spared him a glance and saw Lissa running to his side. And so help me, she had a stake in her hand. How she'd managed that, I had no idea. Maybe she'd picked it up from a fallen guardian. Maybe none of the Strigoi had thought to search her when she came in. After all, why on earth would a Moroi be carrying a stake?

"Stop it! Stay out of the way!" I yelled at them, turning back to Dimitri. Letting those two distract me had cost me. Realizing Dimitri was about to attack, I managed to dodge without even seeing what he was doing. It turned out he'd been reaching for my neck, and my imprecise evasion had spared me the full damage. Still, his hand caught me on the shoulder, knocking me back almost as far as Christian had gone. Unlike my friend, though, I had years of training that had taught me to recover from something like that. I'd honed a lot of balance and recovery skills. I staggered only a little, then quickly regained my footing.

I could only pray Christian and Lissa would listen to me and not do anything stupid. My attention had to stay on Dimitri, or I'd get myself killed. And if I died, Lissa and Christian died for sure. My impression while fighting our way inside had been that the guardians outnumbered the Strigoi, though that meant little sometimes. Still, I had to hope my colleagues would finish our foes off, leaving me to do what I had to do.

Dimitri laughed at my dodge. "I'd be impressed if that wasn't something a ten-year-old could do. Now your friends . . . well, they're also fighting at a ten-year-old level. And for Moroi? That's actually pretty good."

"Yeah, well, we'll see what your assessment is when I kill you," I told him. I made a small feint to test how much he was paying attention. He sidestepped with hardly any notice at all, as graceful as a dancer.

"You can't, Rose. Haven't you figured that out by now? Haven't you *seen* it? You can't defeat me. You can't kill me. Even if you could, you can't bring yourself to do it. You'll hesitate. Again."

No, I wouldn't. That's what he didn't realize. He'd made a mistake bringing Lissa here. She increased the stakes—no pun intended—on everything. She was here. She was real. Her life was on the line, and for that . . . for that, I wouldn't hesitate.

Dimitri must have grown tired of waiting for me. He leapt out, hand again going for my neck. And again I evaded, letting my shoulder take the brunt of the hit. This time he held on to my shoulder. He jerked me toward him, triumph flaring in those red eyes. In the sort of space we were in, this was probably all he needed to kill me. He had what he wanted.

Apparently, though, he wasn't the only one who wanted me. Another Strigoi, maybe thinking he'd help Dimitri, pushed toward us and reached for me. Dimitri bared his fangs, giving the other Strigoi a look of pure hatred and fury.

"Mine!" Dimitri hissed, hitting the other Strigoi in a way that he had clearly not expected.

And that was my opening. Dimitri's brief distraction had caused him to loosen his grip on me. That same close proximity which made him so lethal to me now made me just as dangerous. I was by his chest, by his heart, and I had my stake in hand.

I'll never be able to say for sure just how long the next series of events took. In some ways, it felt like only one heartbeat passed. At the same moment, it was as though we were frozen in time. Like the entire world had stopped.

My stake was moving toward him, and as Dimitri's eyes fell on me once more, I think he finally believed I would kill him. I was not hesitating. This was happening. My stake was there—

And then it wasn't.

Something hit me hard on my right side, pushing me away from Dimitri and ruining my shot. I stumbled, barely avoiding hitting anyone. While I always tried to be vigilant regarding all things around me in a fight, I'd let my guard down in that direction. The Strigoi and guardians were on my left. The wall—and Lissa and Christian—were on my right.

And it was Lissa and Christian who had shoved me out of the way.

I think Dimitri was as astonished as I was. He was also equally astonished

when Lissa came toward him with that stake in her hand. And like lightning through the bond, I read what she had very, very carefully kept from me the last day: She had managed to charm the stake with spirit. It was the reason she'd been so keyed up during her last stake-practice session with Grant and Serena. Knowing she had the tool she needed had fueled her desire to use it. Her hiding all of that information from me was a feat on par with charming the stake.

Not that it mattered right now. Charmed stake or no, she couldn't get near Dimitri. He knew it too, and his surprise immediately changed to delighted amusement—almost indulgent, like the way one watches a child do something adorable. Lissa's attack was awkward. She wasn't fast enough. She wasn't strong enough.

"No!" I screamed, leaping toward them, though pretty certain I wasn't going to be fast enough either.

Suddenly, a blazing wall of heat and flame appeared before me, and I barely had the presence of mind to back up. That fire had shot up from the floor, forming a ring around Dimitri that kept me from him. It was disorienting, but only for a moment. I knew Christian's handiwork.

"Stop it!" I didn't know what to do, if I should attack Christian or leap into the fire. "You'll burn us all alive!" The fire was fairly controlled—Christian had that much skill—but in a room this size, even a controlled fire was deadly. Even the other Strigoi backed away.

The flames were closing in on Dimitri, growing tighter and tighter. I heard him scream, could see the look of agony, even through the fire. It began to consume his coat, and smoke poured out from the blaze. Some instinct told me I needed to stop this . . . and yet, what did it matter? I'd come to kill him. Did it matter if someone else did it for me?

And that's when I noticed Lissa was still on the offensive. Dimitri was distracted, screaming as the flames wrapped around him. I was screaming too . . . for him, for her . . . it's hard to say. Lissa's arm shot through the flames, and again, pain surged through the bond—pain that dwarfed the earlier singe from Christian burning her ropes. Yet she kept going, ignoring the fiery agony. Her alignment was right. She had the stake aimed at the heart.

The stake went in, piercing him.

Well, kind of.

Just like when she'd practiced with the pillow, she didn't quite have the strength to get the stake where it needed to go. I felt her steel herself, felt her summon up every ounce of strength she had. Throwing her full weight into it, she shoved again, using both hands. The stake went in further. Still not enough. This delay would have cost her her life in a normal situation. This was not a normal situation. Dimitri had no means to block her, not with the fire slowly eating him. He did manage a small struggle that loosened the stake, undoing what little progress she'd made. Grimacing, she tried again, pushing the stake back to its former position.

Still, it wasn't enough.

I came to my senses then, knowing I needed to stop this. Lissa was going to burn herself up if she kept trying to stake him. She lacked the skill. Either I needed to stake him or we just needed to let the fire finish him off. I moved

forward. Lissa caught sight of me in her periphery and sent out a blast of compulsion at me.

No! Let me do this!

The command hit me hard, an invisible wall that made me come to a halt. I stood there dazed, both from the compulsion itself and the realization that she'd used it on me. It only took a moment for me to shake it off. She was too distracted to put her full power into the order, and I was pretty compulsion-resistant anyway.

Yet, that slight delay had stopped me from reaching her. Lissa seized her last chance, knowing she'd get no other.

One more time, fighting through the fire's searing pain, she threw everything she had into shoving the stake all the way into Dimitri's heart. Her strike was still awkward, still requiring a little more wiggling and pushing than the clean hit a trained guardian would make. Clumsy or not, the stake finally made it. It pierced his heart. And as it did, I felt magic flood our bond, the familiar magic I'd felt so many times when she performed a healing.

Except . . . this was a hundred times more powerful than anything I'd ever felt before. It froze me up as neatly as her compulsion had. I felt as though all of my nerves were exploding, like I'd just been struck by lightning.

White light suddenly burst out around her, a light that dwarfed the fire's brightness. It was like someone had dropped the sun into the middle of that room. I cried out, my hand rising instinctively to shield my eyes as I stepped backward. From the sounds in the room, everyone else was having a similar reaction.

For a moment, it was as if there was no bond anymore. I felt nothing from Lissa—no pain, no magic. The bond was as colorless and empty as the white light filling the room. The power she'd used had over-flooded and overwhelmed our bond, numbing it.

Then the light simply disappeared. No fade-out. Just . . . gone in an eye blink. Like a switch had been flipped. There was silence in the room, save for a few murmurings of discomfort and confusion. That light must have been toxic to sensitive Strigoi eyes. It was hard enough for me. Starbursts danced in my sight. I couldn't focus on anything as the afterimage of that brilliance burned across my vision.

At last—with a little squinting—I could vaguely see again. The fire was gone, though black smudges on the wall and ceiling marked its presence, as did some lingering smoke. By my estimation, there should have been a lot more damage. I could spare no time for that miracle, though, because there was another one taking place in front of me.

Not just a miracle. A fairy tale.

Lissa and Dimitri were both on the floor. Their clothes were burned and singed. Angry red and pink patches marked her beautiful skin from where the fire had hit hardest. Her hands and wrists were particularly bad. I could see spots of blood where the flames had actually burned some of her skin away. Third-degree burns, if I was recalling my physiology classes correctly. Yet she seemed to feel no pain, nor did the burns affect her hands' movement.

She was stroking Dimitri's hair.

While she sat in some semblance of an upright position, he was in an

ungainly sprawl. His head rested in her lap, and she was running her fingers through his hair in a gentle, repetitive motion—like one does to comfort a child or even an animal. Her face, even marred with the fire's terrible damage, was radiant and filled with compassion. Dimitri had called me an avenging angel, but she was an angel of mercy as she gazed down at him and crooned soothing, nonsense words.

With the state of his clothes and what I'd seen in the fire, I'd expected him to be burned to a crisp—some sort of blackened, skeletal nightmare. Yet when he shifted his head, giving me my first full view of his face, I saw that he was completely unharmed. No burns marked his skin—skin that was as warm and tanned as it had been the first day I'd met him. I caught only a glimpse of his eyes before he buried his face against Lissa's knee. I saw endless depths of brown, the depths I'd fallen into so many times. No red rings.

Dimitri . . . was not a Strigoi.

And he was weeping.

SEVENTEEN

THE ENTIRE ROOM SEEMED to hold its breath. Yet even in the face of miracles, guardians—or Strigoi, for that matter—were hard to distract. Fights that had paused now resumed with just as much fury. The guardians had the upper hand, and those of them who weren't engaged with the last surviving Strigoi suddenly leapt toward Lissa, trying to pull her away from Dimitri. To everyone's surprise, she held on to him tightly and made a few feeble attempts to fight off those crowding around her. She was fierce and protective, again putting me in mind of a mother defending her child.

Dimitri was holding on to her just as intently, but both he and Lissa were outmatched. The guardians finally pried them apart. There were confused shouts as guardians tried to determine whether they should kill Dimitri. It wouldn't have been hard. He was helpless now. He could barely stand when they jerked him to his feet.

That woke me up. I'd simply been staring, frozen and dumbstruck. Shaking off my daze, I sprang forward, though I wasn't sure who I was going for: Lissa or Dimitri.

"No! Don't!" I yelled, seeing some of the guardians move in with stakes. "He's not what you think! He's not Strigoi! Look at him!"

Lissa and Christian were shouting similar things. Someone grabbed me and pulled me back, telling me to let the others handle this. Without even thinking, I turned and punched my captor in the face, discovering too late it was Hans. He fell back a little, seeming more surprised than offended. Attacking him was enough to attract the attention of others, however, and soon I had my own group of guardians to fight off. My efforts didn't do any good, partially because I was outnumbered and partially because I couldn't take them on the same way I'd attacked Strigoi.

As the guardians hauled me out, I noticed then that Lissa and Dimitri had already been removed from the room. I demanded to know where they were, yelling that I had to see them. No one listened to me. They dragged me away, out of the warehouse, passing a disturbing amount of bodies. Most were Strigoi, but I recognized a few faces from the guardian regiment at the Court. I grimaced, even though I hadn't known them well. The battle was over, and our side had won—but at a great cost. The surviving guardians would be doing cleanup now. I wouldn't have been surprised if Alchemists showed up, but at the moment, none of that was my concern.

"Where's Lissa?" I kept demanding as I was shoved inside one of the SUVs. Two guardians slid in with me, one sitting on each side. I didn't know either of them. "Where's Dimitri?"

"The princess has been taken to safety," one of the guardians said crisply. He and the other guy stared straight ahead, and I realized neither was going to

acknowledge the question about Dimitri. He might as well not exist for any of them.

"Where's Dimitri?" I repeated, speaking more loudly in the hopes that might get an answer. "Is he with Lissa?"

That got a reaction. "Of course not," said the guardian who'd spoken before.

"Is he . . . is he alive?" It was one of the hardest questions I'd ever asked, but I had to know. I hated to admit it, but if I were in Hans's place, I wouldn't have been looking for miracles. I would have been exterminating anything I perceived as a threat.

"Yes," said the driver at last. "He . . . it . . . is alive."

And that was all I could get out of them, no matter how much I argued and demanded to be released from the car—and believe me, I did a lot of that. Their ability to ignore me was pretty impressive, really. To be fair, I'm not even sure that they knew what had happened. Everything had occurred so fast. The only thing these two knew was that they'd been ordered to escort me out of the building.

I kept hoping someone I knew might join us in our SUV. Nope. Only more unknown guardians. No Christian or Tasha. Not even Hans—of course, that was understandable. He was probably afraid I'd accidentally punch him again.

When we were loaded up and on the road, I finally gave up my badgering and sank back into the seat. Other SUVs had left with ours, but I had no clue whether my friends were in them.

The bond between Lissa and me was still numb. After that initial shock where I'd felt nothing, I'd slowly regained a slight sense of her, telling me we were still connected and that she was alive. That was about it. With all that power that had blasted through her, it was almost like the bond had been temporarily fried. The magic between us was fragile. Each time I tried to use the bond to check on her, it was as though I'd stared too brightly at something and was still blinded. I just had to assume it would reestablish itself soon because I needed her insight on what had happened.

No, scratch insight. I needed to know what had happened, period. I was still in a bit of shock, and the long ride back to Court allowed me time to process what few facts I had access to. I immediately wanted to jump to Dimitri but needed to start at the beginning if I really wanted to analyze all that had occurred.

First: Lissa had charmed a stake and withheld the info from me. When? Before her college trip? At Lehigh? While captive? It didn't matter.

Second, in spite of her failed pillow attempts, she had gotten the stake into Dimitri's heart. It had been a struggle, but Christian's fire had made it possible. I winced, recalling the burns Lissa had suffered during that ordeal. I'd felt the pain of those before the bond blanked out, and I'd also seen the marks on her. Adrian wasn't the world's best healer, but hopefully his magic would be enough to take care of her injuries.

The third and final fact here . . . well . . . was it a fact? Lissa had stabbed Dimitri and used the same magic she would for a healing . . . and then? That was the big question. What had happened, aside from what felt like a nuclear explosion of magic through our bond? Had I really seen what I thought I'd seen?

Dimitri had . . . changed.

He was no longer a Strigoi. I felt it in my heart, even though I'd only had that brief glimpse of him. It had been enough to allow me to see the truth. The Strigoi features were gone. Lissa had done everything Robert had sworn she needed to do to restore a Strigoi, and certainly after all that magic . . . well, it was easy to believe anything was possible. That image of Dimitri came back to me, clinging to Lissa with tears running down his face. I'd never seen him so vulnerable. Somehow, I didn't believe Strigoi cried.

Something in my heart twisted painfully, and I blinked rapidly to stop from crying too. Glancing around, I tuned back into my surroundings. Outside the car, the sky was lightening. It was nearly sunrise. The guardians with me had signs of weariness on their faces, yet the alert expressions in their eyes never faltered. I'd lost track of the time, but my internal clock told me we'd been on the road for a while. We had to almost be back at Court.

Tentatively, I touched the bond and found it was back but still fragile. It was like it flickered in and out, still reestablishing itself. That was enough to put me at ease, and I breathed a sigh of relief. When the bond had first come about years ago, it had been so strange . . . surreal. Now I'd accepted it as part of my life. Its absence today had felt unnatural.

Looking through Lissa's eyes, at the SUV she rode in, I immediately hoped I'd see Dimitri with her. That one glimpse at the warehouse hadn't been enough. I needed to see him again, needed to see if this miracle had truly happened. I wanted to drink in those features, to gaze at the Dimitri from so long ago. The Dimitri I loved.

But he wasn't with Lissa. Christian was there, however, and he glanced over at her as she stirred. She'd been asleep and still felt groggy. That, combined with the aftereffect of that searing power earlier, kept our connection a little hazy. Things shifted out of focus for me off and on, but overall, I could follow what was happening.

"How do you feel?" asked Christian. His voice and his eyes as he peered at her were filled with so much affection that it seemed impossible she didn't notice. But then, she was a little preoccupied right now.

"Tired. Worn out. Like . . . I don't know. Like I've been thrown around in a hurricane. Or run over by a car. Pick something horrible, and that's what I feel like."

He gave her a small smile and gently touched her cheek. Opening myself to her senses more, I felt the pain of her burns and that he was tracing the skin near one, though being careful to keep away from it.

"Is it awful?" she asked him. "Is all my skin melted off? Do I look like some alien?"

"No," he said, with a small laugh. "There's not that much. You're beautiful, like always. It would take a lot for that to change."

The throbbing pain she felt made her think that there was more damage than he was admitting to, but the compliment and the way he'd said it went a long way to soothe her. For a moment, her whole existence focused on his face and the way the rising sun was starting to light it up.

Then the rest of her world came crashing down on her.

"Dimitri! I need to see Dimitri!"

There were guardians in the car, and she glanced around at them as she spoke. As with me, no one seemed willing to acknowledge him or what had happened.

"Why can't I see him? Why'd you take him away?" This was directed to anyone who would answer, and at last, Christian did.

"Because they think he's dangerous."

"He's not. He's just . . . He needs me. He's hurting inside."

Christian's eyes suddenly went wide, his face filling with panic. "He's not . . . You aren't bonded to him, are you?"

I guessed by the look on his face that Christian was recalling Avery and how bonding with multiple people had pushed her over the edge. Christian hadn't been there for Robert's explanation of the soul going to the world of the dead and how restored Strigoi didn't get bonded.

Lissa shook her head slowly. "No . . . I just know. When I . . . when I healed him, we had this connection, and I felt it. What I had to do . . . I can't explain it." She ran a hand through her hair, frustrated that she couldn't put her magic into words. Weariness was starting to overtake her. "It was like I had to do surgery on his soul," she said at last.

"They think he's dangerous," repeated Christian gently.

"He's not!" Lissa glared around at the rest of the car's occupants, all of whom were looking somewhere else. "He's not Strigoi anymore."

"Princess," began one of the guardians uneasily, "no one really knows what happened. You can't be sure that—"

"I am sure!" she said, voice too loud for the small space. There was a regal, commanding air to it. "*I know.* I saved him. I brought him back. I know with every single part of me that he's no longer Strigoi!"

The guardians looked uncomfortable, again not speaking. I think they were just confused, and really, how could they not be? There was no precedent for this.

"Shh," said Christian, putting his hand on hers. "There's nothing you can do until we're back at Court. You're still hurt and exhausted—it's written all over you."

Lissa knew he was right. She *was* hurt, and she *was* exhausted. That magic had ripped her apart. At the same time, what she had done for Dimitri had created a bond to him—not a magical one, but a psychological one. She really was like a mother. She felt desperately protective and concerned.

"I need to see him," she said.

She did? What about me?

"You will," said Christian, sounding more certain than I suspected he was. "But just try to rest now."

"I can't," she said, even while stifling a yawn.

That smile flickered back across his lips, and he slipped his arm around her, pulling her as close as the seat belts would allow. "Try," he told her.

She rested her head against his chest, and his closeness was a type of healing in and of itself. Worry and concern for Dimitri still coursed through her, but her body's needs were stronger for the moment. At last, she drifted into sleep in Christian's embrace, just barely hearing him murmur, "Happy birthday."

Twenty minutes later, our convoy arrived back at Court. I thought this meant instant freedom, but my guardians took their time in getting out, waiting for some signal or directions that no one had bothered to tell me about. It turned out they were waiting for Hans.

"No," he said, firmly putting a hand on my shoulder as I shot out of the car and tried to race away to . . . well, I wasn't sure where. Wherever Dimitri was. "Hold on."

"I have to see him!" I exclaimed, trying to push past. Hans was like a brick wall. Considering he'd actually fought a lot more Strigoi than me tonight, you'd have thought he'd be tired. "You have to tell me where he is."

To my surprise, Hans did. "Locked away. Far, far out of your reach. Or anyone else's. I know he used to be your teacher, but it's better if he's kept away for now."

My brain, weary from the night's activities and overwrought with emotion, took a moment to process this. Christian's words came back to me. "He's not dangerous," I said. "He's not a Strigoi anymore."

"How can you be so certain?"

The same question Lissa had been asked. How could we really answer that? We knew because we'd gone to incredible pains to find out how to transform a Strigoi, and when we'd completed those steps, there'd been an atom bomb of magic. Wasn't that enough proof for anyone? Hadn't Dimitri's *appearance* been enough?

Instead, my answer was like Lissa's. "I just know."

Hans shook his head, and now I could see he actually was exhausted. "No one knows what's going on with Belikov. Those of us that were there . . . well, I'm not sure what I saw. All I do know is that he was leading Strigoi a little while ago, and now he's out in the sun. It doesn't make any sense. No one knows what he is."

"He's a dhampir."

"And until we do," he continued, ignoring my comment, "Belikov has to stay locked up while we examine him." *Examine?* I didn't like the sound of that. It made Dimitri seem like a lab animal. It made my temper flare, and I nearly started yelling at Hans. A moment later, I got myself under control.

"Then I need to see Lissa."

"She's been taken to the medical center for treatment—which she needs very badly. You can't go there," he added, anticipating my next response. "Half the guardians are there. It's chaos, and you'd be in the way."

"Then what the hell am I supposed to do?"

"Go get some sleep." He gave me a wry look. "I still think you've got a bad attitude, but after what I saw back there . . . well, I'll say this. You know how to fight. We need you—probably for more than paperwork. Now go take care of yourself."

And that was that. The dismissal in his voice was clear, and as the guardians hurried around, it was like I didn't exist. Whatever trouble I'd been in before seemed long forgotten. No more filing in the wake of this. But what was I supposed to do? Was Hans crazy? How could I sleep? I had to do something. I had to see Dimitri—but I didn't know where they'd taken him. Probably the same jail Victor had been kept in, which was inaccessible to me. I also needed

to see Lissa—but she was deep in the medical center. I had no power here. I needed to appeal to someone with influence.

Adrian!

If I went to Adrian, maybe he could pull some strings. He had his royal connections. Hell, the queen loved him, in spite of his slacker ways. As much as it killed me to accept, I was realizing that getting in to see Dimitri right away was going to be nearly impossible. But the medical center? Adrian might be able to get me in to see Lissa, even if it was crowded and chaotic. The bond was still blurry, and talking to her directly would allow me to score faster answers about Dimitri. Plus, I wanted to see for myself that she was all right.

Yet when I reached the housing Adrian stayed in at Court, I was informed by the doorman that Adrian had already left a little while ago to—ironically enough—go to the medical center. I groaned. Of course he'd already be there. With his healing abilities, they would have summoned him out of bed. Weak or not, he could definitely help.

"Were you there?" the doorman asked me as I started to turn away.

"What?" For a minute I thought he was talking about the medical center.

"The battle with the Strigoi! The rescue. We've been hearing all sorts of things."

"Already? What did you hear?"

The guy's eyes were wide and excited. "They say almost every guardian died. But that you captured a Strigoi and brought him back."

"No, no . . . there were more injuries than deaths. And the other . . ." For a moment, I couldn't breathe. What had happened? What had really happened with Dimitri? "A Strigoi was changed back to a dhampir."

The doorman stared. "Were you hit on the head?"

"I'm telling the truth! Vasilisa Dragomir did it. With her spirit power. Spread *that* around."

I left him with his mouth hanging open. And like that, I had no more options, no one else to get information from. I went back to my room feeling defeated but far too keyed up to sleep. At least, that's what I initially thought. After some pacing, I sat on the bed to try to come up with a plan. Yet before long, I felt myself falling into a heavy sleep.

I awoke with a start, confused and aching in parts of my body that I hadn't realized had taken hits in the fight. I peered at the clock, astonished at how long I'd slept. In vampire time, it was late morning. Within five minutes, I had showered and put on non-torn, non-bloody clothes. Just like that, I was out the door.

People were out and about their daily business, yet every couple or group I passed seemed to be talking about the battle at the warehouse—and about Dimitri.

"You know she can heal," I heard one Moroi guy say to his wife. "Why not Strigoi? Why not the dead?"

"It's insane," the woman countered. "I've never believed in this spirit thing anyway. It's a lie to cover up the fact that the Dragomir girl never specialized."

I didn't hear the rest of their conversation, but others I passed had similar themes. People were either convinced the whole thing was a scam or were

regarding Lissa as a saint already. Every so often, I'd heard something weird, like that the guardians had captured a bunch of Strigoi to experiment on. In all the speculation, though, I never heard Dimitri's name come up or knew what was really happening to him.

I followed the only plan I had: Go to the guardian building that held the Court's jail, though I was unsure what I'd actually do when I got there. I wasn't even entirely sure that was where Dimitri still was, but it seemed the most likely place. When I passed a guardian along the way, it took me several seconds to realize I knew him. I came to a halt and turned.

"Mikhail!" He glanced back and, seeing me, walked over. "What's going on?" I asked, relieved to see a friendly face. "Have they let Dimitri out?"

He shook his head. "No, they're still trying to figure out what happened. Everyone's confused, even though the princess still swore up and down after she saw him that he's not Strigoi anymore."

There was a wonder in Mikhail's voice—and wistfulness too. He was hoping that it was true, that there might be a chance for his beloved to be saved. My heart ached for him. I hoped he and Sonya could have a happy ending just like —

"Wait. What did you say?" His words drew my romantic musings to a halt. "Did you say Lissa saw him? You mean after the fight?" I immediately reached for the bond. It was gradually growing clearer—but Lissa was asleep, so I learned nothing.

"He asked for her," Mikhail explained. "So they let her in—guarded, of course."

I stared, my jaw nearly dropping to the ground. Dimitri was seeing visitors. They were actually letting him see visitors. The knowledge lit up the dark mood that had been building in me. I turned away. "Thanks, Mikhail."

"Wait, Rose—"

But I didn't stop. I ran to the guardians' holding building at a full-out sprint, oblivious to the looks I got. I was too excited, too invigorated with this new info. I could see Dimitri. I could finally be with him, back the way he was supposed to be.

"You can't see him."

I literally came to a halt when the guardian on duty in the front reception area stopped me.

"Wh-what? I need to see Dimitri."

"No visitors."

"But Lissa—er, Vasilisa Dragomir got to see him."

"He asked for her."

I stared incredulously. "He must have asked for me too."

The guardian shrugged. "If he did, no one's told me."

The anger I'd kept back last night finally awoke. "Then go find someone who knows! Dimitri wants to see me. You have to let me in. Who's your boss?"

The guardian scowled at me. "I'm not going anywhere until my shift is over. If you've got clearance, someone will let you know. Until then, no one without special permission is allowed to go down there."

After taking out a fair portion of Tarasov's security, I felt pretty confident I could easily dispatch this guy. However, I felt equally confident that once I got

to the depths of the jail cells, I'd run into a lot more guardians. For a second, taking them out seemed very reasonable. It was Dimitri. I would do anything for him. A slight stirring in the bond made me see reason. Lissa had just woken up.

"Fine," I said. I lifted my chin and gave him a haughty look. "Thanks for the 'help.'" I didn't need this loser. I'd go to Lissa.

She was staying at almost the opposite end of the Court's grounds from the holding area, and I covered the distance at a light jog. When I finally reached her and she opened the door to her room, I saw that she'd gotten ready almost as quickly as I had. In fact, I could feel that she'd been pretty close to leaving. Studying her face and hands, I was relieved to see that almost all of the burns were gone. A few red spots lingered on her fingers, but that was it. Adrian's handiwork. No doctor could have made that happen. In a pale blue tank top, with her blond hair pulled back, she didn't look at all like anyone who'd been through such a major ordeal less than twenty-four hours ago.

"Are you okay?" she asked. In spite of everything else that had happened, she'd never stopped worrying about me.

"Yeah, fine." Physically, at least. "You?"

She nodded. "Fine."

"You look good," I said. "Last night . . . I mean, I was pretty scared. With the fire . . ." I couldn't quite finish.

"Yeah," she said, looking away from me. She seemed nervous and uncomfortable. "Adrian's been pretty great healing people."

"Is that where you're going?" There was agitation and restlessness in the bond. It would make sense if she wanted to hurry over to the medical center and help out too. Except . . . further probing gave me the startling truth. "You're going to see Dimitri!"

"Rose—"

"No," I said eagerly. "It's perfect. I'll go with you. I was just over there, and they wouldn't let me in."

"Rose—" Lissa looked very uncomfortable now.

"They gave me some bullshit about how he'd asked for you and not me and that that's why they couldn't let me in. But if you're going, they'll have to let me."

"Rose," she said firmly, finally breaking through my chatter. "You can't go."

"I—what?" I replayed her words, just in case I'd misheard them. "Of course I can. I need to see him. You know I do. And he needs to see me."

She slowly shook her head, still looking nervous—but also sympathetic. "That guardian was right," she said. "Dimitri *hasn't* been asking for you. Only me."

All my eagerness, all that fire, froze up. I was dumbstruck, confused more than anything. "Well . . ." I recalled how he'd clung to her last night, that desperate look on his face. I hated to admit it, but it kind of made sense why he would have asked for her first. "Of course he'd want to see you. Everything's so new and strange, and you're the one who saved him. Once he comes around more, he'll want to see me too."

"Rose, you can't go." This time the sadness in Lissa's voice was mirrored through the bond, flooding into me. "It's not just that Dimitri didn't ask to see

you. He asked specifically *not* to see you."

EIGHTEEN

THE THING THAT REALLY SUCKS about being psychically linked to someone is that you have a pretty good idea when they're lying—or, in this case, not lying. Still, my response was immediate and instinctive.

"That's not true."

"Isn't it?" She gave me a pointed look. She too knew that I could feel the truth in her words.

"But that . . . it can't . . . " I wasn't at a loss for words very often—and certainly not with Lissa. So frequently in our relationship, I'd been the one being assertive and explaining to *her* why things had to be the way they were. Somewhere along the way, with me not realizing it, Lissa had lost that fragility.

"I'm sorry," she said, voice still kind but also firm. The bond betrayed how much she hated telling me unpleasant things. "He asked me . . . told me specifically not to let you come. That he doesn't want to see you."

I stared at her pleadingly, my voice almost childlike. "But why? Why would he say that? Of course he wants to see me. He must be confused. . . ."

"I don't know, Rose. All I know is what he told me. I'm so sorry." She reached for me like she might hug me, but I stepped away. My head was still reeling.

"I'll go with you anyway. I'll wait upstairs with the other guardians. Then, when you tell Dimitri I'm there, he'll change his mind."

"I don't think you should," she said. "He seemed really serious about you not coming—almost frantic. I think knowing you're there would upset him."

"Upset him? *Upset him?* Liss, it's me! He *loves* me. He needs me."

She winced, and I realized I'd been shouting at her. "I'm just going on what he said. It's all so confusing . . . please. Don't put me in this position. Just . . . wait and see what happens. And if you want to know what's going on, you can always . . ."

Lissa didn't finish, but I knew what she was suggesting. She was offering to let me see her meeting with Dimitri through the bond. It was a big gesture on her part—not that she could have stopped me if I wanted to do it. Still, she didn't usually like the idea of being "spied" on. This was the best thing she could think of to make me feel better.

Not that it really did. All of this was still crazy. Me being denied access to Dimitri. Dimitri allegedly not wanting to see me! What the hell? My gut reaction was to ignore everything she'd just said and go along with her, demanding access when she arrived. The feelings in the bond were begging me not to, though. She didn't want to create trouble. She might not understand Dimitri's wishes either, but she felt they should be honored until the situation could be better assessed.

"Please," she said. The plaintive word finally cracked me.

"Okay." It killed me to say it. It was like admitting defeat. *Think of it as a tactical retreat.*

"Thank you." This time she did hug me. "I swear I'll get more information and figure out what's going on, okay?"

I nodded, still dejected, and we walked out of the building together. With grim reluctance, I parted with her when the time came, letting her go off to the guardians' building while I headed toward my room. As soon as she was out of my sight, I immediately slipped into her head, watching through her eyes as she walked through the perfectly manicured grass. The bond was still a little hazy but growing clearer by the minute.

Her feelings were a jumble. She felt bad for me, guilty that she'd had to refuse me. At the same time, she was anxious to visit Dimitri. She needed to see him too—but not in the same way I did. She still had that feeling of responsibility for him, that burning urge to protect him.

When she arrived at the building's main office, the guardian who'd stopped me gave her a nod of greeting and then made a quick phone call. A few moments later, three guardians entered and gestured for Lissa to follow them into the depths of the building. They all looked unusually grim, even for guardians.

"You don't have to do this," one of them told her. "Just because he keeps asking . . ."

"It's fine," she said with the cool, dignified air of any royal. "I don't mind."

"There'll be plenty of guards around just like last time. You don't need to worry about your safety."

She gave all of them a sharp look. "I was never worried about it to begin with."

Their descent into the building's lower levels brought back painful memories of when Dimitri and I had visited Victor. That had been the Dimitri I'd had a perfect union with, the Dimitri who understood me entirely. And after the visit, he'd been enraged at Victor's threats against me. Dimitri had loved me so much that he'd been willing to do anything to protect me.

A key card-protected door finally allowed access to the holding level, which consisted mostly of a long hallway lined with cells. It didn't have the depressing feel that Tarasov had had, but this place's stark and steel-lined industrial air didn't exactly inspire warm and fuzzy feelings.

Lissa could hardly walk down the hall because it was so crowded with guardians. All that security for one person. It wasn't impossible for a Strigoi to break through a cell's steel bars, but Dimitri was no Strigoi. Why couldn't they see that? Were they blind?

Lissa and her escort made their way through the crowd and came to a stop in front of his cell. It was as cold looking as everything else in this prison area, with no more furnishings than were absolutely required. Dimitri sat on the narrow bed, his legs drawn up to him as he leaned into a corner of the wall and kept his back to the cell's entrance. It wasn't what I had expected. Why wasn't he beating at the bars? Why wasn't he demanding to be released and telling them he wasn't a Strigoi? Why was he taking this so quietly?

"Dimitri."

Lissa's voice was soft and gentle, filled with a warmth that stood out against

the harshness of the cell. It was the voice of an angel.

And as Dimitri slowly turned around, it was obvious he thought so too. His expression transformed before our eyes, going from bleakness to wonder.

He wasn't the only one filled with wonder. My mind might have been tied to Lissa's, but back across Court, my own body nearly stopped breathing. The glimpse I'd gotten of him last night had been amazing. But this . . . this full-on view of him looking at Lissa—at me—was awe-inspiring. It was a wonder. A gift. A miracle.

Seriously. How could anyone think he was a Strigoi? And how could I have possibly let myself believe the Dimitri I'd been with in Siberia was *this* one? He'd cleaned up from the battle and wore jeans and a simple black T-shirt. His brown hair was tied back into a short ponytail, and a faint shadow across his lower face showed that he needed to shave. Probably no one would let him get near a razor. Regardless, it almost made him look sexier—more real, more dhampir. More *alive.* His eyes were what really pulled it all together. His death white skin—now gone—had always been startling, but those red eyes had been the worst. Now they were perfect. Exactly as they used to be. Warm and brown and long-lashed. I could have gazed at them forever.

"Vasilisa," he breathed. The sound of his voice made my chest tighten. God, I'd missed hearing him speak. "You came back."

As soon as he began approaching the bars, the guardians around Lissa started closing rank, ready to stop him should he indeed bust through. "Back off!" she snapped in a queenly tone, glaring at everyone around her. "Give us some space." No one reacted right away, and she put more power into her voice. "I mean it! Step back!"

I felt the slightest trickle of magic through our link. It wasn't a huge amount, but she was backing her words with a little spirit-induced compulsion. She could hardly control such a large group, but the command had enough force to make them clear out a little and create space between her and Dimitri. She turned her attention back to him, demeanor instantly changing from fierce to kind.

"Of course I came back. How are you? Are they . . ." She cast a dangerous look at the guardians in the hall. "Are they treating you okay?"

He shrugged. "Fine. Nobody's hurting me." If he was anything like his old self, he would have never admitted if anyone *was* hurting him. "Just a lot of questions. So many questions." He sounded weary, again . . . very unlike a Strigoi who never needed rest. "And my eyes. They keep wanting to examine my eyes."

"But how do you *feel*?" she asked. "In your mind? In your heart?" If the whole situation hadn't been so sobering, I would have been amused. It was very much a therapist's line of questioning—something both Lissa and I had experienced a lot of. I'd hated being asked those questions, but now I truly wanted to know how Dimitri felt.

His gaze, which had so intently focused on her, now drifted away and grew unfocused. "It's . . . it's hard to describe. It's like I've woken up from a dream. A nightmare. Like I've been watching someone else act through my body—like I was at a movie or a play. But it wasn't someone else. It was *me*. All of it was me, and now here I am, and the whole world has shifted. I feel like I'm

relearning everything."

"It'll pass. You'll get more used to it, once you settle back into your old self." That was a guess on her part, but one she felt confident of.

He inclined his head toward the gathered guardians. "They don't think so."

"They will," she said adamantly. "We just need more time." A small silence fell, and Lissa hesitated before speaking her next words. "Rose . . . wants to see you."

Dimitri's dreamy, morose attitude snapped in a heartbeat. His eyes focused back on Lissa, and I got my first glimpse of true, intense emotion from him. "No. Anyone but her. I *can't* see her. Don't let her come here. *Please.*"

Lissa swallowed, unsure how to respond. The fact that she had an audience made it harder. The best she could do was lower her voice so the others wouldn't hear. "But . . . she loves you. She's worried about you. What happened . . . with us being able to save you? Well, a lot of it was because of her."

"You saved me."

"I only did the final piece. The rest . . . well, Rose did, um, a lot." Say, like, organizing a prison break and releasing fugitives.

Dimitri turned from Lissa, and the fire that had briefly lit his features faded. He walked over to the side of the cell and leaned against the wall. He closed his eyes for a few seconds, took a deep breath, and then opened them.

"Anyone but her," he repeated. "Not after what I did to her. I did a lot of things . . . horrible things." He turned his hands palm-up and stared at them for a moment, like he could see blood. "What I did to her was worst of all—especially because it *was* her. She came to save me from that state, and I . . ." He shook his head. "I did terrible things to her. Terrible things to others. I can't face her after that. What I did was unforgivable."

"It's not," said Lissa urgently. "It wasn't you. Not really. She'll forgive you."

"No. There's no forgiveness for me—not after what I did. I don't deserve her, don't deserve to even be around her. The only thing I can do . . ." He walked back over to Lissa, and to the astonishment of both of us, he fell to his knees before her. "The only thing I can do—the only redemption I can try for—is to pay you back for saving me."

"Dimitri," she began uneasily, "I told you—"

"I felt that power. In that moment, I felt you bring my soul back. I felt you heal it. That's a debt I can't ever repay, but I swear I'll spend the rest of my life trying." He was looking up at her, that enraptured look back on his face.

"I don't want that. There's nothing to repay."

"There's everything to pay," he argued. "I owe you my life—my soul. It's the only way I can come close to ever redeeming myself for all the things I did. It's still not enough . . . but it's all I can do." He clasped his hands. "I swear, whatever you need, anything—if it's in my power—I'll do it. I'll serve and protect you for the rest of my life. I'll do whatever you ask. You have my loyalty forever."

Again, Lissa started to say she didn't want that, but then a canny thought came to mind. "Will you see Rose?"

He grimaced. "Anything but that."

"Dimitri—"

“Please. I’ll do anything else for you, but if I see her . . . it’ll hurt too much.”

That was probably the only reason that could have made Lissa drop the subject. That and the desperate, dejected look on Dimitri’s face. It was one she had never seen before, one I’d never seen before either. He’d always been so invincible in my eyes, and this sign of vulnerability didn’t make him seem weaker to me. It simply made him more complex. It made me love him more—and want to help him.

Lissa could only give him a small nod as answer before one of the guardians in charge said she had to leave. Dimitri was still on his knees as they escorted her out, staring after her with an expression that said she was the closest to any hope he had left in this world.

My heart twisted with both sorrow and jealousy—and a bit of anger too. I was the one he should have looked at that way. How dare he? How dare he act like Lissa was the greatest thing in the world? She’d done a lot to save him, true, but *I* was the one who’d traveled around the globe for him. *I* was the one who had continually risked my life for him. Most importantly, *I* was the one who loved him. How could he turn his back on that?

Both Lissa and I were confused and upset as she left the building. Both of us were distraught over Dimitri’s state. Despite how angry I was over his refusal to see me, I still felt horrible at seeing him so low. It killed me. He’d never acted that way before. After the Academy’s attack, he had certainly been sad and had grieved over that loss. This was a different kind of despair. It was a deep sense of depression and guilt that he didn’t feel he could escape from. Both Lissa and I were shocked by that. Dimitri had always been a man of action, someone ready to get up after a tragedy and fight the next battle.

But this? This was unlike anything we’d ever seen in him, and Lissa and I had wildly varying ideas on how to solve it. Her gentler, sympathetic approach was to keep talking to him while also calmly persuading Court officials that Dimitri was no longer a threat. My solution to this problem was to go to Dimitri, no matter what he claimed he wanted. I’d busted in and out of a prison. Getting into a jail cell should be cake. I was still certain that once he saw me, he’d have a change of heart about all this redemption stuff. How could he truly think I wouldn’t forgive him? I loved him. I understood. And as far as convincing officials that he wasn’t dangerous . . . well, my method there was a little fuzzy still, but I had a feeling it would involve a lot of yelling and beating on doors.

Lissa knew perfectly well that I had observed her encounter with Dimitri, so she didn’t feel obligated to come see me, not when she knew they could still use her over at the medical center. She’d heard Adrian had nearly collapsed with all the magic he’d wielded to help others. It seemed so uncharacteristic of him, so unselfish . . . he’d done amazing deeds, at great cost to himself.

Adrian.

There was a problem. I hadn’t had a chance to see him since getting back after the warehouse fight. And aside from hearing about him healing others, I really hadn’t thought about him at all. I’d said that if Dimitri really could be saved, it didn’t mean the end of Adrian and me. Yet, Dimitri had barely been back twenty-four hours, and here I was, already obsessing ov—

“Lissa?”

Despite the fact that I'd pulled back to my own mind, part of me was still absentmindedly following along with Lissa. Christian was standing outside the medical center, leaning against its wall. From his posture, it appeared as though he'd been there for a while waiting for something—or rather, someone.

She came to a halt, and inexplicably, all thoughts of Dimitri vanished from her mind. Oh, come *on*. I wanted those two to patch things up, but we had no time for this. Dimitri's fate was a lot more important than bantering with Christian.

Christian didn't look like he was in a snarky mood, though. His expression was curious and concerned as he regarded her. "How are you feeling?" he asked. They hadn't talked to each other since the ride back, and she'd been largely incoherent during a lot of it.

"Fine." She touched her face absentmindedly. "Adrian healed me."

"I guess he is good for something." Okay, maybe Christian was feeling a little snarky today. But only a little.

"Adrian's good for lots of things," she said, though she couldn't help a small smile. "He ran himself into the ground here all night."

"What about you? I know how you are. As soon as you were up and around, you were probably right there beside him."

She shook her head. "No. After he healed me, I went to see Dimitri."

All mirth disappeared from Christian's face. "You've talked to him?"

"Twice now. But yeah. I have."

"And?"

"And what?"

"What's he like?"

"He's like Dimitri." She suddenly frowned, reconsidering her words. "Well . . . not quite like Dimitri."

"What, does he still have some Strigoi in him?" Christian straightened up, blue eyes flashing. "If he's still dangerous, you have no business going near—"

"No!" she exclaimed. "He's not dangerous. And . . ." She took a few steps forward, returning his glare. "Even if he was, *you* have no business telling me what I can or can't do!"

Christian sighed dramatically. "And here I thought Rose was the only one who threw herself into stupid situations, regardless of whether they might kill her."

Lissa's anger flared up rapidly, likely because of all the spirit she'd been using. "Hey, you didn't have any issues helping me stake Dimitri! You trained me for it."

"That was different. We were in a bad situation already, and if things went wrong . . . well, I could have incinerated him." Christian regarded her from head to toe, and there was something in his gaze . . . something that seemed like more than just objective assessment. "But I didn't have to. You were amazing. You made the hit. I didn't know if you could, but you did . . . and the fire . . . You didn't flinch at all, but it must have been awful. . . ."

There was a catch in his voice as he spoke, like he was only now truly assessing the consequences of what might have happened to Lissa. His concern and admiration made her flush, and she tilted her head—an old trick—so that

the pieces of hair that had escaped from her ponytail would fall forward and hide her face. There was no need for it. Christian was now staring pointedly at the ground.

"I had to do it," she said at last. "I had to see if it was possible."

He looked up. "And it was . . . right? There really isn't any trace of Strigoi?"

"None. I'm positive. But no one believes it."

"Can you blame them? I mean, I helped out with it and I wanted it to be true . . . but I'm not sure I ever really, *truly* thought someone could come back from that." He glanced away again, his gaze resting on a lilac bush. Lissa could smell its scent, but the distant and troubled look on his face told her that his thoughts weren't on nature. Neither were they on Dimitri, I realized. He was thinking about his parents. What if there'd been spirit users around when the Ozeras had turned Strigoi? What if there had been a way to save them?

Lissa, not guessing what I had, remarked, "I don't even know that I believed either. But as soon as it happened, well . . . I knew. I *know*. There's no Strigoi in him. I have to help him. I have to make others realize it. I can't let them lock him up forever—or worse." Getting Dimitri out of the warehouse without the other guardians staking him had been no easy feat for her, and she shivered recalling those first few seconds after his change when everyone had been shouting to kill him.

Christian turned back and met her eyes curiously. "What did you mean when you said he was like Dimitri but not like Dimitri?"

Her voice trembled a little when she spoke. "He's . . . sad."

"Sad? Seems like he should be happy he was saved."

"No . . . you don't understand. He feels awful about everything he did as a Strigoi. Guilty, depressed. He's punishing himself for it because he doesn't think he can be forgiven."

"Holy shit," said Christian, clearly caught off guard. A few Moroi girls had walked by just then and looked scandalized at his swearing. They hurried off, whispering among themselves. Christian ignored them. "But he couldn't help it—"

"I know, I know. I already went over it with him."

"Can Rose help?"

"No," Lissa said bluntly.

Christian waited, apparently hoping she'd elaborate. He grew annoyed when she didn't. "What do you mean she can't? She should be able to help us more than anyone!"

"I don't want to get into it." My situation with Dimitri bothered her a lot. That made two of us. Lissa turned toward the medical building. It looked regal and castle-like on the outside, but it housed a facility as sterile and modern as any hospital. "Look, I need to get inside. And don't look at me like that."

"Like what?" he demanded, taking a few steps toward her.

"That disapproving, pissed-off look you get when you don't get your way."

"I don't have that look!"

"You have it right now." She backed away from him, moving toward the center's door. "If you want the whole story, we can talk later, but I don't have the time . . . and honestly . . . I don't really feel like telling it."

That pissed-off look—and she was right, he *did* have it—faded a little. Almost nervously, he said, “Okay. Later then. And Lissa . . .”

“Hmm?”

“I’m glad you’re all right. What you did last night . . . well, it really was amazing.”

Lissa stared at him for several heavy seconds, her heart rate rising slightly as she watched a light breeze ruffle his black hair. “I couldn’t have done it without your help,” she said at last. With that, she turned and went inside, and I returned completely to my own head.

And like earlier, I was at a loss. Lissa would be busy the rest of the day, and standing and yelling in the guardians’ office wouldn’t really help me get to Dimitri. Well, I supposed there was the off chance I might annoy them so much that they’d throw *me* in jail too. Then Dimitri and I would be next to each other. I promptly dismissed that plan, fearing the only thing it would land me with was more filing.

What could I do? Nothing. I needed to see him again but didn’t know how. I *hated* not having a plan. Lissa’s encounter with Dimitri hadn’t been nearly long enough for me, and anyway, I felt it was important to take him in through my eyes, not hers. And oh, that sadness . . . that utter look of hopelessness. I couldn’t stand it. I wanted to hold him, to tell him everything would be okay. I wanted to tell him I forgave him and that we’d make everything like it used to be. We could be together, just the way we planned . . .

The thought brought tears to my eyes, and left alone with my frustration and inactivity, I returned to my room and flounced onto the bed. Alone, I could finally let loose the sobs I’d been holding in since last night. I didn’t even entirely know what I was crying for. The trauma and blood of the last day. My own broken heart. Dimitri’s sorrow. The cruel circumstances that had ruined our lives. Really, there were a lot of choices.

I stayed in my room for a good part of the day, lost in my own grief and restlessness. Over and over, I replayed Lissa’s meeting with Dimitri, what he’d said and how he looked. I lost track of time, and it took a knock at the door to snap me out of my own suffocating emotions.

Hastily rubbing an arm over my eyes, I opened the door to find Adrian standing out there. “Hey,” I said, a little surprised by his presence—not to mention guilty, considering I’d been moping over another guy. I wasn’t ready to face Adrian yet, but it appeared I had no choice now. “Do you . . . do you want to come in?”

“Wish I could, little dhampir.” He seemed to be in a hurry, not like he’d come to have a relationship talk. “But this is just a drop-by visit to issue an invitation.”

“Invitation?” I asked. My mind was still on *Dimitri. Dimitri, Dimitri, Dimitri.*

“An invitation to a party.”

NINETEEN

"ARE YOU CRAZY?" I ASKED.

He gave me the same wordless look he always did when I asked that question.

I sighed and tried again. "A *party*? That's pushing it, even for you. People just died! Guardians. Priscilla Voda." Not to mention, people had just come back from the dead. Probably best to leave that part out. "This isn't the time to get trashed and play beer pong."

I expected Adrian to say that it was always a good time for beer pong, but he remained serious. "Actually, it's *because* people died that there's going to be a party. It's not a kegger type. Maybe party's not even the right word. It's a . . ." He frowned, grasping at words. "A special event. An elite one."

"All royal parties are elite ones," I pointed out.

"Yeah, but not every royal is invited to this. It's the . . . well, elite of the elite."

That really wasn't helping. "Adrian—"

"No, listen." He made that familiar gesture of his that indicated frustration, running his hand through his hair. "It's not so much a party as a ceremony. An old, old tradition from . . . I don't know. Romania, I think. They call it the Death Watch. But it's a way to honor the dead, a secret that's been passed on through the oldest bloodlines."

Flashbacks of a destructive secret society at St. Vladimir's came back to me. "This isn't some Mânã thing, is it?"

"No, I swear. Please, Rose. I'm not all that into it either, but my mom's making me go, and I'd really like it if you were there with me."

Elite and *bloodline* were warning words to me. "Will there be other dhampirs there?"

"No." He then added quickly, "But I made arrangements for some people you'll approve of to be there. It'll make it better for both of us."

"Lissa?" I guessed. If ever there was an esteemed bloodline, hers was it.

"Yeah. I just ran into her at the medical center. Her reaction was about like yours."

That made me smile. It also piqued my interest. I wanted to talk to her more about what had happened during her visit to Dimitri and knew she'd been avoiding me because of it. If going to some silly royal ritual or whatever it was could get me to her, then so much the better.

"Who else?"

"People you'll like."

"Fine. Be mysterious. I'll go to your cult meeting."

That earned me a return smile. "Hardly a cult, little dhampir. It really *is* a way to pay last respects to the people killed in that fight." He reached out and ran a hand along my cheek. "And I'm glad . . . God, I'm so glad you weren't

one of them. You don't know. . . ." His voice caught, the flippant smile trembling for a moment before stabilizing again. "You don't know how worried I was. Every minute you were gone, every minute I didn't know what had happened to you . . . it was agony. And even after I heard you were okay, I kept asking everyone at the medical center what they knew. Had they seen you fight, did you get hurt . . ."

I felt a lump in my throat. I hadn't been able to see Adrian when I'd returned, but I should have sent a message, at least. I squeezed his hand and tried to make a joke of something that really wasn't funny. "What'd they say? That I was a badass?"

"Yeah, actually. They couldn't stop talking about how amazing you were in battle. Word got back to Aunt Tatiana too about what you did, and even she was impressed."

Whoa. That was a surprise. I started to ask more, but his next words brought me up short.

"I also heard you were yelling at anyone you could to find out about Belikov. And that you were beating down the guardians' doors this morning."

I looked away. "Oh. Yeah. I . . . Look, I'm sorry, but I had to—"

"Hey, hey." His voice was heavy and earnest. "Don't apologize. I understand."

I looked up at him. "You do?"

"Look, it's not like I didn't expect this if he came back."

I glanced back at him hesitantly, studying his serious expression. "I know. I remember what you said before. . . ."

He nodded, then gave me another rueful smile. "Of course, I didn't actually expect any of this to work. Lissa tried to explain the magic she used . . . but good God. I don't think I could ever do anything like she did."

"Do you believe?" I asked. "Do you believe he's no longer Strigoi?"

"Yeah. Lissa said he's not, and I believe her. And I saw him from a distance out in the sun. But I'm not sure it's a good idea for you to try to see him."

"That's your jealousy talking." I had absolutely no right to sound accusing, considering the way my heart was all tangled up over Dimitri.

"Of course it's jealousy," said Adrian nonchalantly. "What do you expect? The former love of your life comes back—from the dead, no less. That's not something I'm really excited about. But I don't blame you for feeling confused."

"I told you before—"

"I know, I know." Adrian didn't sound particularly upset. In fact, there was a surprisingly patient tone in his voice. "I know you said him coming back wouldn't affect things between us. But saying one thing before it happens and then actually having that thing happen are two different things."

"What are you getting at?" I asked, kind of confused.

"I want you, Rose." He squeezed my hand more tightly. "I've always wanted you. I want to be with you. I'd like to be like other guys and say I want to take care of you too, but . . . well. When it comes down to it, you'd probably be the one taking care of me."

I laughed in spite of myself. "Some days I think you're in more danger from yourself than anyone else. You smell like cigarettes, you know."

“Hey, I have never, ever said I was perfect. And you’re wrong. You’re probably the most dangerous thing in my life.”

“Adrian—”

“Wait.” With his other hand, he pressed his fingers over my lips. “Just listen. It’d be stupid for me to think that your old boyfriend coming back isn’t going to have any effect on you. So do I like you wanting to see him? No, of course not. That’s instinct. But there’s more, you know. I do believe that he’s a dhampir again. Absolutely. But . . .”

“But what?” Adrian’s words had me more curious than ever now.

“But just because he isn’t a Strigoi doesn’t mean it’s entirely gone from him. Hold on.” Adrian could see my mouth opening in outrage. “I’m not saying he’s evil or means to be evil or anything like that. But what he went through . . . It’s huge. Epic. We really don’t know much about the changing process. What effect did that kind of life have on him? Are there violent parts of him that might suddenly lash out? That’s what I’m worried about Rose. I know you. I know you aren’t going to be able to help yourself. You’ll have to see him and talk to him. But is it safe? That’s what no one knows. We don’t know anything about this. We don’t know if he’s dangerous.”

Christian had said the same thing to Lissa. I examined Adrian intently. It sounded like a convenient excuse to keep Dimitri and me apart. Yet, I saw truth in those deep green eyes. He meant it. He was nervous about what Dimitri might do. Adrian had also been honest about being jealous, which I had to admire. He hadn’t ordered me not to see Dimitri or tried to dictate my behavior. I liked that too. I extended my hand and laced my fingers with Adrian’s.

“He’s not dangerous. He’s . . . sad. Sad for what he’s done. The guilt’s killing him.”

“I can imagine. I probably wouldn’t forgive myself either if I suddenly realized I’d been brutally killing people for the last four months.” Adrian pulled me to him and kissed the top of my head. “And for everyone’s sake—yes, even his—I really hope he is exactly the way he was. Just be careful, okay?”

“I will,” I said, kissing his cheek. “Inasmuch as I ever am.”

He grinned and released me. “That’s the best I can hope for. For now, I’ve got to head back to my parents’ for a little bit. I’ll come back for you at four, okay?”

“Okay. Is there anything I should wear to this secret party?”

“Nice dress clothes are fine.”

Something occurred to me. “If this is so elite and prestigious, how are you going to get a lowly dhampir like me in?”

“With this.” Adrian reached for a bag he’d set down upon entering. He handed it to me.

Curiously, I opened the bag and gaped at what I saw. It was a mask, one that just covered the top half of the face around the eyes. It was intricately worked with gold and green leaves and bejeweled flowers.

“A mask?” I exclaimed. “We’re wearing masks to this thing? What is this, Halloween?”

He winked. “See you at four.”

* * *

We didn't actually put on the masks until we arrived at the Death Watch. As part of the secret nature of it all, Adrian said we didn't want to call any attention to ourselves while going to it. So we walked across the Court's grounds dressed up—I wore the same dress I'd worn to dinner at his parents'—but not getting much more notice than the two of us usually did when we were together. Besides, it was late, and a lot of the Court was getting ready for bed.

Our destination surprised me. It was one of the buildings that non-royal Court workers lived in, one that was very near Mia's. Well, I supposed the last place you'd look for a royal party would be at the home of a commoner. Except we didn't go to any of the apartments inside. Once we stepped into the building's lobby, Adrian indicated we should put our masks on. He then took me over to what appeared to be a janitor's closet.

It wasn't. Instead, the door opened to a staircase leading down into darkness. I couldn't see the bottom, which put me on high alert. I instinctively wanted to know the details of every situation I entered. Adrian seemed calm and confident as he headed down, so I took it on faith he wasn't leading me to some sacrificial altar. I hated to admit it, but curiosity over this Death Watch thing was temporarily taking my mind off Dimitri.

Adrian and I eventually reached another door, and this one had two guards. Both men were Moroi, both masked like Adrian and me. Their postures were stiff and defensive. They said nothing but simply looked at us expectantly. Adrian said a few words that sounded like Romanian, and a moment later, one of the men unlocked the door and gestured us inside.

"Secret password?" I murmured to Adrian as we swept past.

"Passwords, actually. One for you and one for me. Every guest has a unique one."

We stepped into a narrow tunnel lit only by torches embedded in the walls. Their dancing flames cast fanciful shadows as we passed by. From far ahead, the low murmur of conversation reached us. It sounded surprisingly normal, like any conversation you'd hear at a party. Based on Adrian's description, I'd half-expected to hear chanting or drums.

I shook my head. "I knew it. They keep a medieval dungeon under the Court. I'm surprised there aren't chains on the walls."

"Scared?" Adrian teased, clasping hold of my hand.

"Of this? Hardly. I mean, on the Rose Hathaway Scale of Scariness, this is barely a—"

We emerged out of the hall before I could finish. An expansive room with vaulted ceilings spread out before us, something that boggled my spatially challenged brain as I tried to recall just how far underground we'd gone. Wrought-iron chandeliers holding lit candles hung from the ceiling, casting the same ghostly light the torches had. The walls were made of stone, but it was a very artful, pretty stone: gray with reddish flecks, polished into smooth round pieces. Someone had wanted to keep the Old World dungeon feel but still have the place look stylish. It was a typical line of royal thinking.

Fifty or so people were milling around the room, some huddled in groups. Like Adrian and me, they wore formal clothing and half masks. All the masks were different. Some had a floral theme like mine, while others were decorated with animals. Some simply had swirls or geometric designs. Even though the masks only covered half the guests' faces, the sketchy lighting went a long way to obscure any other identifying features. I scrutinized them carefully, hoping I might pick out details that would give someone away.

Adrian led me out of the entryway and over toward a corner. As my view of the area expanded, I could see a large fire pit in the middle of the room, embedded in the stone floor. No fire burned in it, but everyone kept well away. For a moment, I had a disorienting flash of déjà vu, thinking back to my time in Siberia. I'd been to a type of memorial ceremony there too—though hardly one with masks or passwords—and everyone had sat around a bonfire outdoors. It had been in Dimitri's honor, as all those who had loved him sat and told stories about him.

I tried to get a better look at the fire, but Adrian was intent on keeping us behind the bulk of the crowd. "Don't bring attention to yourself," he warned.

"I was just looking."

"Yeah, but anyone who looks too close is going to realize you're the shortest person here. It'd be pretty obvious you're a dhampir. This is elite old blood, remember?"

I frowned at him as much as I could through the mask. "But I thought you said you'd made arrangements for me to be here?" I groaned when he didn't answer. "Does 'making arrangements' mean just sneaking me in? If so, those guys were kind of crap security."

Adrian scoffed. "Hey, we had the right passwords. That's all it takes. I stole —er, borrowed them off my mom's list."

"Your mom's one of the people who helped organize this?"

"Yup. Her branch of the Tarus family's been deep inside this group for centuries. They apparently had a really big ceremony here after the school attack."

I turned all of this over in my mind, trying to decide how I felt. I hated when people were obsessed with status and appearances, yet it was hard to fault them wanting to honor those who had been killed—particularly when a majority of them had been dhampirs. The Strigoi attack on St. Vladimir's was a memory that would forever haunt me. Before I could ponder much further, a familiar sensation swept me.

"Lissa's here," I said, looking around. I could feel her nearby but didn't spot her immediately in the sea of masks and shadows. "There."

She stood apart from some of the others, wearing a rosehued dress and a white and gold mask with swans on it. Through our link, I felt her searching for anyone she knew. I impulsively started to go to her, but Adrian held me back, telling me to wait while he retrieved her.

"What is all this?" she asked when she reached me.

"I figured you'd know," I told her. "It's all top secret royal stuff."

"Too top secret for me," she said. "I got my invite from the queen. She told me it was part of my heritage and to keep it to myself, and then Adrian came and said I had to come for your sake."

“Tatiana invited you directly?” I exclaimed. Maybe I shouldn’t have been surprised. Lissa would have hardly needed sneaking in like I did. I figured someone would have made sure she got an invitation, but I’d assumed it had all been Adrian’s doing. I glanced around uneasily. “Is Tatiana here?”

“Likely,” said Adrian, voice annoyingly casual. As usual, his aunt’s presence didn’t have the same impact on him that it did the rest of us. “Oh, hey. There’s Christian. With the fire mask.”

I didn’t know how Adrian spotted Christian, aside from the not-so-subtle mask metaphor. With his height and dark hair, Christian easily blended in with the other Moroi around him and had even been chatting with a girl standing nearby, which seemed out of character. “No way did *he* get a legit invite,” I said. If any Ozeras had been deemed special enough to come to this, Christian wouldn’t have been one of them.

“He didn’t,” agreed Adrian, making a small gesture for Christian to join us. “I gave him one of the passwords I stole from Mom.”

I gave Adrian a startled look. “How many did you steal?”

“Enough to—”

“Let us come to attention.”

A man’s booming voice rang out through the room, halting both Adrian’s words and Christian’s steps. With a grimace, Christian returned to where he’d been standing, cut off from us now on the other side of the room. It looked like I wouldn’t have the chance to ask Lissa about Dimitri after all.

Without any direction, the others in the room began forming a circle around the fire pit. The room wasn’t big enough for us to make a single-layered circle, so I was still able to stay behind other Moroi as I watched the spectacle. Lissa stood by me, but her attention was fixated across from us, on Christian. She was disappointed that he hadn’t been able to join us.

“Tonight we come to honor the spirits of those who died fighting the great evil that has plagued us for so long.” This was the same man who had called us to attention. The black mask he wore glittered with silver swirls. He wasn’t anyone special that I recognized. It was probably safe to assume that he was someone from an important bloodline who happened to have a good voice for bringing people together. Adrian confirmed it.

“That’s Anthony Badica. They always recruit him as an emcee.”

Anthony seemed more like a religious leader than an emcee right now, but I didn’t want to answer back and attract anyone’s notice.

“Tonight we honor them,” continued Anthony.

I flinched as almost everyone around us repeated those words. Lissa and I exchanged startled looks. Apparently, there was a script we hadn’t been told about.

“Their lives were taken from us too soon,” continued Anthony.

“Tonight we honor them.”

Okay, this script might not be so hard to follow after all. Anthony kept talking about how terrible the tragedy was, and we repeated the same response. The whole idea of this Death Watch still weirded me out, but Lissa’s sadness permeated the bond and began to affect me too. Priscilla had always been good to her—and polite to me. Grant might have only been Lissa’s guardian a short time, but he had protected her and helped her. In fact, if not

for Grant's work with Lissa, Dimitri might still be a Strigoi. So, slowly, the gravity of it all began to hit me, and even if I thought there were better ways to mourn, I appreciated the acknowledgment the dead were getting.

After a few more refrains, Anthony gestured someone forward. A woman in a glittering emerald mask came forward with a torch. Adrian shifted beside me. "My darling mother," he murmured.

Sure enough. Now that he'd pointed it out, I could clearly make out Daniella's features. She tossed her torch into the fire pit, and it lit up like the Fourth of July. Someone must have doused that wood with either gasoline or Russian vodka. Maybe both. No wonder the other guests had kept their distance. Daniella melted into the crowd, and another woman came forward holding a tray with golden goblets. Walking around the circle, she handed a cup to each person. When she ran out, another woman appeared with a tray.

As the goblets were distributed, Anthony explained, "Now we will toast and drink to the dead, so that their spirits will move on and find peace."

I shifted uncomfortably. People talked about restless spirits and the dead finding peace without really knowing what that meant. Being shadow-kissed came with the ability to see the restless dead, and it had taken me a long time to gain control so that I *didn't* see them. They were always around me; I had to work to keep them blocked out. I wondered what I'd see now if I let down my walls. Would the ghosts of those killed the night of Dimitri's attack be hovering around us?

Adrian sniffed his cup as soon as he got it and scowled. For a moment, I felt panic until I sniffed mine too. "Wine. Thank God," I whispered to him. "From your face, I thought it was blood." I recalled how much he hated blood that wasn't straight from the source.

"Nah," he murmured back. "Just a bad vintage."

When everyone had their wine, Anthony raised his cup over his head with both hands. With the fire behind him, it gave him an almost sinister, otherworldly look. "We drink to Priscilla Voda," he said.

"We drink to Priscilla Voda," everyone repeated.

He brought the goblet down and took a sip. So did everyone else—well, except for Adrian. He gulped half his down, bad vintage or not. Anthony raised his cup over his head again.

"We drink to James Wilket."

As I repeated the words, I realized James Wilket was one of Priscilla's guardians. This crazy group of royals really was showing respect to dhampirs. We went through the other guardians one by one, but I kept my sips small, wanting to keep a level head tonight. I was pretty sure that by the end of the name list, Adrian was faking his sips because he'd run out.

When Anthony finished naming all who had died, he held his cup up again and approached the blazing fire, which had begun to make the small room uncomfortably hot. The back of my dress was growing damp with sweat.

"To all those lost by the great evil, we honor your spirits and hope they will move on in peace to the next world." He then dumped the remainder of his wine into the flames.

All this talk of spirits lingering in the world certainly didn't go along with the usual Christian afterlife beliefs that dominated Moroi religion. It made me

wonder just how old this ceremony really was. Once more, I had an urge to drop my barriers and see if any of this had really drawn ghosts to us, but I feared what I'd find. Besides, I promptly got distracted when everyone else in the circle began dumping their wine into the fire as well. One by one, going clockwise, each person approached. All was silent as this happened, save for the crackling in the fire pit and shifting of logs. Everyone watched respectfully.

When my turn came, I fought hard not to tremble. I hadn't forgotten that Adrian had sneaked me in here. Lowly Moroi weren't allowed, let alone dhampirs. What would they do? Declare the space violated? Mob me? Cast me into the fire?

My fears proved unfounded. No one said or did anything unusual as I poured out my wine, and a moment later, Adrian stepped forward for his turn. I melted back beside Lissa. When the entire circle had gone up, we were led into a moment of silence for the departed. Having witnessed Lissa's kidnapping and subsequent rescue, I had a lot of dead to ponder. No amount of silence would ever do them justice.

Another unspoken signal seemed to pass through the room. The circle dispersed, and the tension lifted. People again fell into small chatty groups, just like at any other party, though I did see tears on the faces of some.

"A lot of people must have liked Priscilla," I observed.

Adrian turned toward a table that had mysteriously been arranged during the ceremony. It sat against the back wall and was filled with fruit, cheese, and more wine. Naturally, he poured a glass.

"They aren't *all* crying for her," he said.

"I find it hard to believe they're crying for the dhampirs," I pointed out. "No one here even knew them."

"Not true," he said.

Lissa quickly caught his meaning. "Most of the people who went on the rescue would have been guardians assigned to Moroi. They couldn't all be Court guardians."

She was right, I realized. We'd had too many people with us at the warehouse. Many of these Moroi had undoubtedly lost guardians that they'd become close to. Despite the disdain I often had for these types of royals, I knew some had probably formed legitimate friendships with and attachments to their bodyguards.

"This is a lame party," a voice suddenly said. We turned and saw that Christian had finally made his way over to us. "I couldn't tell if we were supposed to be having a funeral or summoning the devil. It was kind of a half-assed attempt at both."

"Stop it," I said, surprising myself. "Those people died for *you* last night. Whatever this is, it's still out of respect for them."

Christian's face grew sober. "You're right."

Beside me, I'd felt Lissa light up inside when she saw him. The horrors of their ordeal had brought them closer together, and I recalled the tenderness they'd shared on the ride back. She offered him a warm look and got a tentative smile in return. Maybe some good would come of all that had happened. Maybe they'd be able to fix their problems.

Or maybe not.

Adrian broke into a grin. “Hey. Glad you could make it.”

For a moment, I thought he was speaking to Christian. Then I looked and saw a girl in a peacock mask had joined us. With the mingling people and masks, I hadn’t noticed that she was purposely standing near us. I peered at her, seeing only blue eyes and golden curls before I finally recognized her. Mia.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

She grinned. “Adrian got me a password.”

“Adrian apparently got passwords for half the party.”

He seemed very pleased with himself. “See?” he said, smiling at me. “I told you I’d make this worth your while. The whole gang’s here. Nearly.”

“This is one of the weirdest things I’ve ever seen,” said Mia, glancing around. “I don’t see why it has to be a secret that the people who got killed were heroes. Why can’t they wait for the group funeral?”

Adrian shrugged. “I told you, this is an ancient ceremony. It’s a holdover from the Old Country, and these people think it’s important. From what I know, it used to be a lot more elaborate. This is the modernized version.”

It occurred to me then that Lissa hadn’t said a single word since we’d noticed Christian had come with Mia. I opened myself to the bond, feeling a flood of jealousy and resentment. I still maintained Mia was one of the last people Christian would be involved with. (Okay, it was hard for me to imagine him involved with *anyone*. His getting together with Lissa had been monumental.) Lissa couldn’t see that, though. All she saw was him continually hanging out with other girls. As our conversation continued, Lissa’s attitude grew frostier, and the friendly looks he’d been giving her began to fade.

“So is it true?” Mia asked, oblivious to the drama unfolding around her. “Is Dimitri really . . . back?”

Lissa and I exchanged glances. “Yes,” I said firmly. “He’s a dhampir, but no one believes it yet. Because they’re idiots.”

“It just happened, little dhampir.” Adrian’s tone was gentle, though the topic clearly made him uncomfortable too. “You can’t expect everyone to get on board with it right away.”

“But they *are* idiots,” said Lissa fiercely. “Anyone who talks to him can tell he’s not a Strigoi. I’m pushing for them to let him out of his cell so that people can actually see for themselves.”

I wished she would push a little harder for *me* to get to see him, but now wasn’t the time to talk about that. Eyeing the room, I wondered if some people would have trouble accepting Dimitri because of his role in the deaths of their loved ones. He hadn’t been in control of himself, but that wasn’t enough to bring back the dead.

Still uncomfortable around Christian, Lissa was growing restless. She also wanted to leave and check on Dimitri. “How long do we have to stay here? Is there more to—”

“Who the hell are you?”

Our little cluster turned as one and found Anthony standing by us. Considering most of us were here illicitly, he could have been speaking to anyone. But, based on where his gaze was fixed, there was no question who he

meant.

He was talking to me.

TWENTY

"YOU'RE NOT MOROI," HE CONTINUED. He wasn't shouting, but we'd definitely gotten the attention of the people standing near us. "You're Rose Hathaway, aren't you? How dare you and your impure blood invade the sanctity of our—"

"That's enough," a lofty voice suddenly said. "I'll take it from here."

Even with her face covered, there was no mistaking that voice. Tatiana swept in beside the guy, wearing a silver flowered mask and a long-sleeved gray dress. I'd probably seen her earlier in the crowd and not even realized it. Until she spoke, she blended in with everyone else.

The whole room was quiet now. Daniella Ivashkov scurried up behind Tatiana, her eyes widening behind her mask when she recognized me. "Adrian —" she began.

But Tatiana was seizing the situation. "Come with me."

There was no question that the order was for me or that I would obey. She turned and walked swiftly toward the room's entrance. I hurried behind her, as did Adrian and Daniella.

As soon as we were out in the torch-lit hall, Daniella turned on Adrian. "What were you thinking? You know I don't mind you bringing Rose to certain events, but this was—"

"Inappropriate," said Tatiana crisply. "Although, perhaps it is fitting that a dhampir see how much the sacrifices of her people are respected."

That shocked us all into a moment of silence. Daniella recovered herself first. "Yes, but tradition states that—"

Tatiana interrupted her again. "I'm well aware of the tradition. It's a bad breach of etiquette, but Rosemarie being here certainly doesn't ruin our intentions. Losing Priscilla . . ." Tatiana didn't choke up, exactly, but she lost some of her normal composure. I didn't think of someone like her as having a best friend, but Priscilla pretty much had been. How would I act if I'd lost Lissa? Not nearly so controlled.

"Losing Priscilla is something I'll feel for a very, very long time," Tatiana managed at last. Her sharp eyes were on me. "And I hope you really do understand how much we need and value you and all the other guardians. I know sometimes your race feels underappreciated. You aren't. Those who died have left a gaping hole in our ranks, one that leaves us even more undefended, as I'm sure you must know."

I nodded, still surprised Tatiana wasn't shrieking for me to get out. "It's a big loss," I said. "And it makes the situation worse because numbers are what harm us half the time—especially when the Strigoi form large groups. We can't always match that."

Tatiana nodded, seeming pleasantly surprised we'd agreed on something. That made two of us. "I knew you'd understand. Nonetheless . . ." She turned

toward Adrian. “You shouldn’t have done this. Some lines of propriety need to be maintained.”

Adrian was surprisingly meek. “Sorry, Aunt Tatiana. I just thought it was something Rose should see.”

“You’ll keep this to yourself, won’t you?” asked Daniella, turning back to me. “A lot of the guests are very, very conservative. They wouldn’t want this getting out.”

That they met by firelight and played dress-up? Yeah, I could see them wanting that kept a secret.

“I won’t tell anyone,” I assured them.

“Good,” said Tatiana. “Now, you should still probably leave before—is that Christian Ozera?” Her eyes had drifted back toward the crowded room.

“Yes,” both Adrian and I said.

“He didn’t get an invitation,” exclaimed Daniella. “Is that your fault too?”

“It’s not my fault so much as my genius,” said Adrian.

“I doubt anyone will know, so long as he behaves himself,” said Tatiana with a sigh. “And I’m sure he’d take any opportunity he can to talk to Vasilisa.”

“Oh,” I said, without thinking. “That’s not Lissa.” Lissa had actually turned her back toward Christian and was speaking to someone else while casting anxious looks out the door at me.

“Who is it?” asked Tatiana.

Crap. “That’s, um, Mia Rinaldi. She’s a friend of ours from St. Vladimir’s.” I’d almost considered lying and giving her a royal name. Some families were so big that it was impossible to keep track of everyone.

“Rinaldi.” Tatiana frowned. “I think I know a servant with that name.” I was actually pretty impressed that she knew the people who worked for her. Yet again, my opinion of her shifted.

“A servant?” asked Daniella, giving her son a warning look. “Is there anyone else I should know about?”

“No. If I’d had more time, I probably could have got Eddie here. Hell, maybe even Jailbait.”

Daniella looked scandalized. “Did you just say Jailbait?”

“It’s just a joke,” I said hastily, not wanting to make this situation worse. I was afraid of how Adrian might answer. “It’s what we sometimes call our friend Jill Mastrano.”

Neither Tatiana nor Daniella seemed to think that was a joke at all.

“Well, no one seems to realize they don’t belong,” said Daniella, nodding toward Christian and Mia. “Though the gossips here will no doubt be running wild with how Rose interrupted this event.”

“Sorry,” I said, feeling bad that I might have gotten her in trouble.

“Nothing to be done for it now,” said Tatiana wearily. “You should leave now so that everyone thinks you were severely chastised. Adrian, you come back with us and make sure your other ‘guests’ don’t raise any attention. And do *not* do something like this again.”

“I won’t,” he said, almost convincingly.

The three began to turn away, leaving me to skulk off, but Tatiana paused and glanced back. “Wrong or not, don’t forget what you saw here. We really

do need guardians."

I nodded, a flush of pride running through me at her acknowledgment. Then she and the others returned to the room. I watched them wistfully, hating that everyone in there thought I'd been kicked out in disgrace. Considering it could have gone a lot worse for me, I decided to count my blessings. I removed the mask, having nothing more to hide, and made the trek back upstairs and outdoors.

I hadn't gotten very far when someone stepped out in front of me. It was a sign of my preoccupation that I nearly leapt ten feet in the air.

"Mikhail," I exclaimed. "You scared me half to death. What are you doing out here?"

"Actually, I've been looking for you." There was an anxious, nervous look about him. "I went by your building earlier, but you weren't around."

"Yeah, I was at the Masquerade of the Damned."

He stared at me blankly.

"Never mind. What's up?"

"I think we might have a chance."

"Chance for what?"

"I heard you tried to see Dimitri today."

Ah, yes. The topic I definitely wanted to think more about. "Yeah. 'Try' is pretty optimistic. *He* doesn't want to see me, never mind the army of guardians blocking me out."

Mikhail shifted uncomfortably, peering around like a frightened animal. "That's why I came to find you."

"Okay, I'm really not following any of this." I was also starting to get a headache from the wine.

Mikhail took a deep breath and exhaled. "I think I can sneak you in to see him."

I waited for a moment, wondering if there was a punch line coming or if maybe this was all some delusion born out of my wound-up emotions. Nope. Mikhail's face was deadly serious, and while I still didn't know him that well, I'd picked up enough to realize he didn't really joke around.

"How?" I asked. "I tried and—"

Mikhail beckoned for me to follow. "Come on, and I'll explain. We don't have much time."

I wasn't about to waste this chance and hurried after him. "Has something happened?" I asked, once I'd caught up to his longer stride. "Did . . . did he ask for me?" It was more than I dared to hope for. Mikhail's use of the word *sneak* didn't really support that idea anyway.

"They've lightened his guard," Mikhail explained.

"Really? How many?" There had been about a dozen down there when Lissa visited, including her escort. If they'd come to their senses and realized they only needed a guy or two on Dimitri, then that boded well for everyone accepting that he was no longer Strigoi.

"He's down to about five."

"Oh." Not great. Not horrible. "But I guess even that means they're a little closer to believing he's safe now?"

Mikhail shrugged, keeping his eyes on the path ahead of us. It had rained

during the Death Watch, and the air, while still humid, had cooled a little. "Some of the guardians do. But it'll take a royal decree from the Council to officially declare what he is."

I almost came to a halt. "*Declare what he is*?" I exclaimed. "He's not a what! He's a person. A dhampir like us."

"I know, but it's out of our hands."

"You're right. Sorry," I grumbled. No point in shooting the messenger. "Well, I hope they get off their asses and come to a decision soon."

The silence that followed spoke legions. I gave Mikhail a sharp glare.

"What? What aren't you telling me?" I demanded.

He shrugged. "The rumor is that there's some other big thing being debated in the Council right now, something that takes priority."

That enraged me too. What in the world could take priority over Dimitri? *Calm, Rose. Stay calm. Focus. Don't let the darkness make this worse.* I always fought to keep it buried, but it often exploded in times of stress. And this? Yeah, this was a pretty stressful time. I shifted back to the original topic.

We reached the holding building, and I took the steps up two at a time. "Even if they've lightened the guardians on Dimitri, they still won't let me in. The ones that are there would know I was ordered to keep away."

"A friend of mine's covering the front shift right now. We won't have long, but he'll tell the guardians in the holding area that you were authorized to come down."

Mikhail was about to open the door, and I stopped him, putting my hand on his arm. "Why are you doing this for me? The Moroi Council might not think Dimitri's a big deal, but the guardians do. You could get in big trouble."

He looked down at me, again with that small, bitter smile. "Do you have to ask?"

I thought about it. "No," I said softly.

"When I lost Sonya . . ." Mikhail closed his eyes for a heartbeat, and when he opened them, they seemed to be staring off into the past. "When I lost her, I didn't want to go on living. She was a good person—really. She turned Strigoi out of desperation. She saw no other way to save herself from spirit. I would give anything—*anything*—for a chance to help her, to fix things between us. I don't know if that'll ever be possible for us, but it *is* possible for you right now. I can't let you lose this."

With that, he let us in, and sure enough, there was a different guardian on duty. Just as Mikhail had said, the guy called down to tell the jail guardians Dimitri had a visitor. Mikhail's friend seemed incredibly nervous about it all, which was understandable. Still, he was willing to help. It was amazing, I thought, what friends would do for each other. These last couple of weeks were undeniable proof of that.

Just like at Lissa's visit, two guardians showed up to escort me downstairs. I recognized them from when I'd been in her head, and they seemed surprised to see me. If they'd overheard Dimitri adamantly saying he didn't want me to visit, then my presence would indeed be shocking. But as far as they knew, someone in power had condoned me being here, so they asked no questions.

Mikhail trailed us as we wound our way down, and I felt my heartbeat and breathing grow rapid. Dimitri. I was about to see Dimitri. What would I say?

What would I do? It was almost too much to comprehend. I had to keep mentally slapping myself to focus, or else I was going to slide into dumbstruck shock.

When we reached the hallway that held the cells, I saw two guardians standing in front of Dimitri's cell, one at the far end, and two others by the entrance we'd come through. I stopped, uneasy about the thought of others overhearing me talk to Dimitri. I didn't want an audience like Lissa had had, but with the emphasis on security here, I might not have a choice.

"Can I get a little privacy?" I asked.

One of my escorts shook his head. "Official orders. Two guardians have to be posted at the cell at all times."

"She's a guardian," pointed out Mikhail mildly. "So am I. Let us go. The rest can wait by the door."

I flashed Mikhail a grateful look. I could handle having him nearby. The others, deciding we would be safe enough, moved discreetly to the ends of the hall. It wasn't total and complete privacy, but they wouldn't hear everything.

My heart felt ready to burst from my chest as Mikhail and I walked over to Dimitri's cell and faced it. He was seated almost as he had been when Lissa arrived: on the bed, curled up into himself, back facing us.

Words stuck in my throat. Coherent thought fled from my mind. It was like I'd totally forgotten the reason I'd come here.

"Dimitri," I said. At least, that's what I tried to say. I choked up a little, so the sounds that came out of my mouth were garbled. It was apparently enough, though, because Dimitri's back suddenly went rigid. He didn't turn around.

"Dimitri," I repeated, more clearly this time. "It's . . . me."

There was no need for me to say any more. He'd known from that first attempt at his name who I was. I had a feeling he would have known my voice in any situation. He probably knew the sound of my heartbeat and breathing. As it was, I think I stopped breathing while I waited for his response. When it came, it was a little disappointing.

"No."

"No what?" I asked. "As in, no, it's not me?"

He exhaled in frustration, a sound almost—but not quite—like the one he used to make when I did something particularly ridiculous in our trainings. "No, as in I don't want to see you." His voice was thick with emotion. "They weren't supposed to let you in."

"Yeah. Well, I kind of found a work-around."

"Of course you did."

He still wouldn't face me, which was agonizing. I glanced over at Mikhail, who gave me a nod of encouragement. I guessed I should be glad that Dimitri was talking to me at all.

"I had to see you. I had to know if you were okay."

"I'm sure Lissa's already updated you."

"I had to see for myself."

"Well, now you see."

"All I see is your back."

It was maddening, yet every word I got out of him was a gift. It felt like a

thousand years since I'd heard his voice. Like before, I wondered how I could have ever confused the Dimitri in Siberia with this one. His voice had been identical in both places, the same pitch and accent, yet as a Strigoi, his words had always left a chill in the air. This was warm. Honey and velvet and all sorts of wonderful things wrapping around me, no matter the terrible things he was saying.

"I don't want you here," said Dimitri flatly. "I don't want to see you."

I took a moment to assess strategy. Dimitri still had that depressed, hopeless feel around him. Lissa had approached it with kindness and compassion. She'd gotten through his defenses, though a lot of that was because he regarded her as his savior. I could try a similar tactic. I could be gentle and supportive and full of love—all of which were true. I loved him. I wanted to help him so badly. Yet I wasn't sure that particular method would work for me. Rose Hathaway was not always known for the soft approach. I did, however, play on his sense of obligation.

"You can't ignore me," I said, trying to keep my volume out of range of the other guardians. "You owe me. I saved you."

A few moments of silence passed. "Lissa saved me," he said carefully.

Anger burned within my chest, just as it had when I'd watched Lissa visit him. How could he hold her in such high regard but not *me*?

"How do you think she got to that point?" I demanded. "How do you think she learned how to save you? Do you have any idea what we—what *I*—had to go through to get that information? You think me going to Siberia was crazy? Believe me, you haven't even come close to seeing crazy. You know me. You know what I'm capable of. And I broke my own records this time. You. Owe. Me."

It was harsh, but I needed a reaction from him. Some kind of emotion. And I got it. He jerked around, eyes glinting and power crackling through his body. As always, his movements were both fierce and graceful. Likewise, his voice was a mix of emotions: anger, frustration, and concern.

"Then the best thing I can do is—"

He froze. The brown eyes that had been narrowed with aggravation suddenly went wide with . . . what? Amazement? Awe? Or perhaps that stunned feeling I kept having when I saw him?

Because suddenly, I was pretty sure he was experiencing the same thing I had earlier. He'd seen me plenty of times in Siberia. He'd seen me just the other night at the warehouse. But now . . . now he was truly viewing me with his own eyes. Now that he was no longer Strigoi, his whole world was different. His outlook and feelings were different. Even his soul was different.

It was like one of those moments when people talked about their lives flashing before their eyes. Because as we stared at one another, every part of our relationship replayed in my mind's eye. I remembered how strong and invincible he'd been when we first met, when he'd come to bring Lissa and me back to the folds of Moroi society. I remembered the gentleness of his touch when he'd bandaged my bloodied and battered hands. I remembered him carrying me in his arms after Victor's daughter Natalie had attacked me. Most of all, I remembered the night we'd been together in the cabin, just before the Strigoi had taken him. A year. We'd known each other only a year, but we'd

lived a lifetime in it.

And he was realizing that too, I knew, as he studied me. His gaze was all-powerful, taking in every single one of my features and filing them away. Dimly, I tried to recall what I looked like today. I still wore the dress from the secret meeting and knew it looked good on me. My eyes were probably bloodshot from crying earlier, and I'd only had time for a quick brushing of my hair before heading off with Adrian.

Somehow, I doubted any of it mattered. The way Dimitri was looking at me . . . it confirmed everything I'd suspected. The feelings he'd had for me before he'd been turned—the feelings that had become twisted while a Strigoi—were all still there. They *had* to be. Maybe Lissa was his savior. Maybe the rest of the Court thought she was a goddess. I knew, right then, that no matter how bedraggled I looked or how blank he tried to keep his face, I was a goddess to him.

He swallowed and forcibly gained control of himself, just like he always had. Some things never changed. "Then the best thing I can do," he continued calmly, "is to stay away from you. That's the best way to repay the debt."

It was hard for me to keep control and maintain some sort of logical conversation. I was as awestruck as he was. I was also outraged. "You offered to repay Lissa by staying by her side forever!"

"I didn't do the things . . ." He averted his eyes for a moment, again struggling for control, and then met mine once more. "I didn't do the things to her that I did to you."

"You weren't you! I don't care." My temper was starting to burn again

"How many?" he exclaimed. "How many guardians died last night because of what I did?"

"I . . . I think six or seven." Harsh losses. I felt a small pang in my chest, recalling the names read off in that basement room.

"Six or seven," Dimitri repeated flatly, anguish in his voice. "Dead in one night. Because of me."

"You didn't act alone! And I told you, you weren't you. You couldn't control yourself. It doesn't matter to me—"

"It matters to me!" he shouted, his voice ringing through the hallway. The guardians at each end shifted but didn't approach. When Dimitri spoke again, he kept his voice lower, but it was still trembling with wild emotions. "It matters to me. That's what you don't get. You can't understand. You can't understand what it's like knowing what I did. That whole time being Strigoi . . . it's like a dream now, but it's one I remember clearly. There can be no forgiveness for me. And what happened with you? I remember that most of all. Everything I did. Everything I *wanted* to do."

"You're not going to do it now," I pleaded. "So let it go. Before—before everything happened, you said we could be together. That we'd get assignments near each other and—"

"Roza," he interrupted, the nickname piercing my heart. I think he'd slipped up, not truly meaning to call me that. There was a twisted smile on his lips, one without humor. "Do you really think they're going to ever let me be a guardian again? It'll be a miracle if they let me live!"

"That's not true. Once they realize you've changed and that you're really

your old self . . . everything'll go back to how it was."

He shook his head sadly. "Your optimism . . . your belief that you can make anything happen. Oh, Rose. It's one of the amazing things about you. It's also one of the most infuriating things about you."

"I believed that you could come back from being a Strigoi," I pointed out. "Maybe my belief in the impossible isn't so crazy after all."

This conversation was so grave, so heartbreaking, yet it still kept reminding me of some of our old practice sessions. He'd try to convince me of some serious point, and I'd counter it with Rose-logic. It would usually earn me a mix of amusement and exasperation. I had the feeling that were the situation just a little different, he'd have that same attitude now. But this was not a practice session. He wouldn't smile and roll his eyes. This was serious. This was life and death.

"I'm grateful for what you did," he said formally, still struggling to master his feelings. It was another trait we shared, both of us always working to stay in control. He'd always been better at it than me. "I do owe you. And it's a debt I can't pay. Like I said, the best thing I can do is stay out of your life."

"If you're part of Lissa's, then you can't avoid me."

"People can exist around each other without . . . without there being any more than that," he said firmly. It was such a Dimitri thing to say. Logic fighting emotion.

And that's when I lost it. Like I said, he was always better at keeping control. Me? Not so much.

I threw myself against the bars, so rapidly that even Mikhail flinched. "But I love you!" I hissed. "And I know you love me too. Do you really think you can spend the rest of your life ignoring that when you're around me?"

The troubling part was that for a very long time at the Academy, Dimitri had been convinced he could do exactly that. And he had been prepared to spend his life not acting on his feelings for me.

"You love me," I repeated. "I know you do." I stretched my arm through the bars. It was a long way from touching him, but my fingers reached out desperately, as though they might suddenly grow and be able to make contact. That was all I needed. One touch from him to know he still cared, one touch to feel the warmth of his skin and—

"Isn't it true," said Dimitri quietly, "that you're involved with Adrian Ivashkov?"

My arm dropped.

"Wh—where did you hear that?"

"Things get around," he said, echoing Mikhail.

"They certainly do," I muttered.

"So are you?" he asked more adamantly.

I hesitated before answering. If I told him the truth, he'd have more ground to make his point about us keeping apart. It was impossible for me to lie to him, though.

"Yes, but—"

"Good." I'm not sure how I expected him to react. Jealousy? Shock? Instead, as he leaned back against the wall, he looked . . . relieved. "Adrian's a better person than he gets credit for. He'll be good to you."

"But—"

"That's where your future is, Rose." A bit of that hopeless, world-weary attitude was returning. "You don't understand what it's like coming through what I did—coming back from being a Strigoi. It's changed everything. It's not just that what I did to you is unforgiveable. All my feelings . . . my emotions for you . . . they changed. I don't feel the way I used to. I might be a dhampir again, but after what I went through . . . well, it's scarred me. It altered my soul. I can't love anyone now. I can't—*I don't*—love you. There's nothing more between you and me."

My blood turned cold. I refused to believe his words, not after the way he'd looked at me earlier. "No! That's not true! I love you and you—"

"Guards!" Dimitri shouted, his voice so loud that it was a wonder the whole building didn't shake. "Get her out of here. *Get her out of here!*"

With amazing guardian reflexes, the guards were down at the cell in a flash. As a prisoner, Dimitri wasn't in a position to make requests, but the authorities here certainly weren't going to encourage a situation that would create a commotion. They began herding Mikhail and me out, but I resisted.

"No, wait—"

"Don't fight it," murmured Mikhail in my ear. "Our time's running out, and you couldn't have accomplished anything else today anyway."

I wanted to protest, but the words stuck on my lips. I let the guardians direct me out, but not before I gave Dimitri one last, lingering look. He had a perfect, guardian-blank look on his face, but the piercing way he stared at me made me certain there was a lot going on within him.

Mikhail's friend was still on duty upstairs, which let us slip out without getting in—much—more trouble. As soon as we were outdoors, I came to a halt and kicked one of the steps angrily.

"Damn it!" I yelled. A couple of Moroi across the courtyard—probably coming home from some late party—gave me startled looks.

"Calm down," said Mikhail. "This was the first time you've seen him since the change. There are only so many miracles you can expect right away. He'll come around."

"I'm not so sure," I grumbled. Sighing, I looked up at the sky. Little wispy clouds moved lazily about, but I barely saw them. "You don't know him like I do."

Because while part of me thought that a lot of what Dimitri had said was indeed a reaction to the shock of returning to himself, there was another part of me that wondered. I knew Dimitri. I knew his sense of honor, his adamant beliefs about what was right and wrong. He stood by those beliefs. He lived his life by them. If he truly, truly believed that the right thing to do was to avoid me and let any relationship between us fade, well . . . there was a good chance he might very well act on that idea, no matter the love between us. As I'd recalled earlier, he'd certainly shown a lot of resistance back at St. Vladimir's.

As for the rest . . . the part about him no longer loving me or being able to love anyone . . . well, that would be a different problem all together if it were true. Both Christian and Adrian had worried there would be some piece of Strigoi left in him, but their fears had been about violence and bloodshed. No

one would have guessed this: that living as a Strigoi had hardened his heart, killing any chance of him loving anyone.

Killing any chance of him loving *me*.

And I was pretty sure that if that was the case, then part of me would die too.

TWENTY-ONE

THERE WAS LITTLE MORE MIKHAIL and I could say to each other after that. I didn't want him to get in trouble for what he'd done, and I let him lead us out of the guardians' building in silence. As we emerged outside, I could see the sky purpling in the east. The sun was nearly up, signaling the middle of our night. Briefly flipping into Lissa's mind, I read that the Death Watch had finally ended, and she was on her way back to her room—worried about me and still annoyed that Christian had shown up with Mia.

I followed Lissa's example, wondering if sleep might ease the agony that Dimitri had left in my heart. Probably not. Still, I thanked Mikhail for his help and the risk he'd taken. He merely nodded, like there was nothing to thank him for. It was exactly what he would have wanted me to do for him if our roles had been reversed and Ms. Karp had been the one behind bars.

I fell into a heavy sleep back in my bed, but my dreams were troubled. Over and over, I kept hearing Dimitri tell me he couldn't love me anymore. It beat into me over and over, smashing my heart into little pieces. At one point, it became more than a dreamlike beating. I heard real beating. Someone was pounding on my door, and slowly, I dragged myself out of my awful dreams.

Bleary-eyed, I went to the door and found Adrian. The scene was almost a mirror of last night when he'd come to invite me to the Death Watch. Only this time, his face was much grimmer. For a second, I thought he'd heard about my visit to Dimitri. Or that maybe he'd gotten in a lot more trouble than we'd realized for sneaking half of his friends into a secret funeral.

"Adrian . . . this is early for you. . . ." I glanced over at a clock, discovering that I'd actually slept in pretty late.

"Not early at all," he confirmed, face still serious. "Lots of stuff going on. I had to come tell you the news before you heard it somewhere else."

"What news?"

"The Council's verdict. They finally passed that big resolution they've been debating. The one you came in for."

"Wait. They're done?" I recalled what Mikhail had said, that a mystery issue had been keeping the Council busy. If it was finished, then they could move on to something else—say, like, officially declaring Dimitri a dhampir again. "That's great news." And if this really was tied into when Tatiana had had me come describe my skills . . . well, was there really a chance I might be named Lissa's guardian? Could the queen have really come through? She'd seemed friendly enough last night.

Adrian regarded me with something I'd never seen from him: pity. "You have no idea, do you?"

"No idea about what?"

"Rose . . ." He gently rested a hand on my shoulder. "The Council just passed a decree lowering the guardian age to sixteen. Dhampirs'll graduate

when they're sophomores and then go out for assignments."

"What?" Surely I'd misheard.

"You know how panicked they've been about protection and not having enough guardians, right?" He sighed. "This was their solution to increasing your numbers."

"But they're too young!" I cried. "How can anyone think sixteen-year-olds are ready to go out and fight?"

"Well," said Adrian, "because you testified that they were."

My mouth dropped, everything freezing around me. *You testified that they were . . .* No. It couldn't be possible.

Adrian gently nudged my arm, trying to shake me out of my stupor. "Come on, they're still wrapping up. They made the announcement in an open session, and some people are . . . a little upset."

"Yeah, I'll say." He didn't need to tell me twice. I immediately started to follow, then realized I was in my pajamas. I quickly changed and brushed my hair, still scarcely able to believe what he'd just said. My preparation only took five minutes, and then we were out the door. Adrian wasn't overly athletic, but he kept a pretty good pace as we headed toward the Council's hall.

"How did this happen?" I asked. "You don't really mean that . . . that what I said played a role?" I'd meant my words to be a demand, but they came out with more of a pleading note.

He lit a cigarette without breaking stride, and I didn't bother chastising him for it. "It's apparently been a hot topic for a while. It was a pretty close vote. The people pushing for it knew they'd need to show a lot of evidence to win. You were their grand prize: a teen dhampir slaying Strigoi left and right, long before graduation."

"Not that long," I muttered, my fury kindling. Sixteen? Were they serious? It was ludicrous. The fact that *I* had been unknowingly used to support this decree made me sick to my stomach. I'd been a fool, thinking they'd all ignored my rule breaking and had simply paraded me in to praise me. They'd used me. *Tatiana* had used me.

When we reached it, the Council hall was in as much chaos as Adrian had implied. True, I hadn't spent a lot of time in these kinds of meetings, but I was pretty sure that people standing up in clusters and yelling at each other wasn't normal. The Council's herald probably didn't usually scream himself hoarse trying to bring order to the crowd either.

The only spot of calm was Tatiana herself, sitting patiently in her seat at the center of the table, just as Council etiquette dictated. She looked very pleased with herself. The rest of her colleagues had lost all sense of propriety and were on their feet like the audience, arguing amongst themselves or anyone else ready to pick a fight. I stared in amazement, unsure what to do in all this disorder.

"Who voted for what?" I asked.

Adrian studied the Council members and ticked them off on his fingers. "Szelsky, Ozera, Badica, Dashkov, Conta, and Drozdov. They were against it."

"Ozera?" I asked in surprise. I didn't know the Ozera princess—Evette—very well, but she'd always seemed pretty stiff and unpleasant. I had new respect

for her now.

Adrian nodded over to where Tasha was furiously addressing a large group of people, eyes flashing and arms waving wildly. “Evette was persuaded by some of her family members.”

That made me smile too, but only for a moment. It was good that Tasha and Christian were being acknowledged amongst their clan again, but the rest of our problem was still alive and kicking. I could deduce the rest of the names.

“So . . . Prince Ivashkov voted for it,” I said. Adrian shrugged by way of apology for his family. “Lazar, Zeklos, Tarus, and Voda.” That the Voda family would vote for extra protection wasn’t entirely a surprise, considering the recent slaughter of one of their members. Priscilla wasn’t even in her grave yet, and the new Voda prince, Alexander, seemed clearly unsure what to do with his sudden promotion.

I gave Adrian a sharp look. “That’s only five to six. Oh.” Realization dawned. “Shit. Royal tiebreaker.”

The Moroi voting system had been set up with twelve members, one for each family, and then whoever the reigning king or queen was. True, it often meant one group got two votes, since the monarch rarely voted against his or her own family. It had been known to happen. Regardless, the system should have had thirteen votes, preventing ties. Except . . . a recent problem had developed. There were no Dragomirs on the Council anymore, meaning ties could occur. In that rare event, Moroi law dictated that the monarch’s vote carried extra weight. I’d heard that had always been controversial, and yet at the same time, there wasn’t much to be done for it. Ties in the Council would mean nothing ever got settled, and since monarchs were elected, many took it on faith that they would act in the best interests of the Moroi.

“Tatiana’s was the sixth,” I said. “And hers swayed it.” Glancing around, I saw a bit of anger on the faces of those from the families who had voted against the decree. Apparently, not everyone believed Tatiana had acted in the best interest of the Moroi.

Lissa’s presence sang to me through the bond, so her arrival a few moments later was no surprise. News had spread fast, though she didn’t yet know the fine details. Adrian and I waved her over. She was as dumbfounded as we were.

“How could they do that?” she asked.

“Because they’re too afraid that someone might make *them* learn to defend themselves. Tasha’s group was getting too loud.”

Lissa shook her head. “No, not just that. I mean, why were they even in session? We should be in mourning after what happened the other day—publicly. The whole Court, not just some secret part of it. One of the Council members even died! Couldn’t they wait for the funeral?” In her mind’s eye, I could see the images from that grisly night, where Priscilla had died right before Lissa’s eyes.

“But was easily replaceable,” a new voice said. Christian had joined us. Lissa took a few steps away from him, still annoyed about Mia. “And actually, it’s the perfect time. The people who wanted this had to jump at their chance. Every time there’s a big Strigoi fight, everyone panics. Fear’ll make a lot of people get on board with this. And if any Council members were undecided

before this, that battle probably pushed them over."

That was pretty wise reasoning for Christian, and Lissa was impressed, despite her troubled feelings for him right now. The Council's herald finally managed to make his voice heard over the shouts of the audience. I wondered if the group would have quieted down if Tatiana herself had started yelling at them to shut up. But no. That was probably beneath her dignity. She was still sitting there calmly, like nothing unusual was going on.

Nonetheless, it took several moments for everyone to settle down and take their seats. My friends and I hurriedly grabbed the first ones we could find. With peace and quiet achieved at last, the weary-looking herald yielded the floor to the queen.

Smiling grandly at the assembly, she addressed them in her most imperious voice. "We'd like to thank everyone for coming today and expressing your . . . opinions. I know some are still unsure about this decision, but Moroi law has been followed here—laws that have been in place for centuries. We will have another session soon to listen to what you have to say in an *orderly* fashion." Something told me that was an empty gesture. People could talk all they wanted; she wouldn't listen. "This decision—this *verdict*—will benefit the Moroi. Our guardians are already so excellent." She gave a condescending nod toward the ceremonial guardians standing along the room's walls. They wore typically neutral faces, but I was guessing that, like me, they probably wanted to punch half the Council. "They are so excellent, in fact, that they train their students to be ready to defend us at an early age. We will all be safer from tragedies like that which recently occurred."

She lowered her head a moment in what must have been a show of grieving. I recalled last night when she'd choked up over Priscilla. Had that been an act? Was her best friend's death a convenient way for Tatiana to push forward with her own agenda. Surely . . . surely, she wasn't that cold.

The queen lifted her head and continued. "And again, we're happy to listen to you register your opinions, although by our own laws, this matter *is* settled. Further sessions will have to wait until an adequate period of mourning has passed for the unfortunate departed."

Her tone and body language implied that this was indeed the end of the discussion. Then, an impertinent voice suddenly broke the room's silence.

My voice.

"Well, I'd kind of like to register my opinion now."

Inside my head, Lissa was shouting: *Sit down, sit down!* But I was already on my feet, moving toward the Council's table. I stopped at a respectful distance, one that would let them notice me but not get me tackled by guardians. And oh, they noticed me. The herald flushed bright red at my rule breaking.

"You are out of line and in violation of all Council protocol! Sit down right now before you are removed." He glanced over at the guardians, like he expected them to come charging forward right then. None of them moved. Either they didn't perceive me as a threat, or they were wondering what I was going to do. I was also wondering this.

With a small, delicate hand gesture, Tatiana waved the herald back. "I daresay there's been so much breach of protocol today that one more incident won't make a difference." She fixed me with a kind smile, one that was

apparently intended to make us look like friends. “Besides, Guardian Hathaway is one of our most valuable assets. I’m always interested in what she has to say.”

Was she really? Time to find out. I addressed my words to the Council.

“This thing you’ve just passed is utterly and totally insane.” I considered it a great feat on my part that I didn’t use any swear words there because I had some adjectives in mind that were much more fitting. Who said I didn’t understand Council etiquette? “How can any of you sit there and think it’s okay to send sixteen-year-olds out to risk their lives?”

“It’s only two years’ difference,” said the Tarus prince. “It’s not like we’re sending ten-year-olds.”

“Two years is a lot.” I thought for a moment about when I’d been sixteen. What had happened in those two years? I’d run off with Lissa, watched friends die, traveled around the world, fallen in love. . . . “You can live a lifetime in two years. And if you want us to keep being on the front lines—which most of us willingly do when we graduate—then you owe us those two years.”

This time, I glanced back at the audience. The reactions were mixed. Some clearly agreed with me, nodding along. Some looked as though nothing in the world would change their minds about the decree being just. Others wouldn’t meet my eyes. . . . Had I swayed them? Were they undecided? Embarrassed at their own selfishness? They might be the keys.

“Believe me, I would love to see your people enjoy their youth.” This was Nathan Ivashkov speaking. “But right now, that’s not an option we have. The Strigoi are closing in. We’re losing more Moroi and guardians every day. Getting more fighters out there will stop this, and really, we’re just letting those dhampirs’ skills go to waste by waiting a couple years. This plan will protect *both* our races.”

“It’ll kill mine off faster!” I said. Realizing I might start shouting if I lost control, I took a deep breath before going on. “They won’t be ready. They won’t have all the training they need.”

And that was where Tatiana herself made her master play. “Yet, by your own admission, you were certainly prepared at a young age. You killed more Strigoi before you were eighteen than some guardians kill their entire lives.”

I fixed her with a narrow-eyed look. “I,” I said coldly, “had an excellent instructor. One that you currently have locked up. If you want to talk about skills going to waste, then go look in your own jail.”

There was a slight stirring in the audience, and Tatiana’s *we’re pals* face grew a little cold. “That is *not* an issue we are addressing today. Increasing our protection is. I believe you have even commented in the past that the guardian ranks are lacking in numbers.” My own words, thrown back at me from last night. “They need to be filled. You—and many of your companions—have proven you’re able to defend us.”

“We were exceptions!” It was egotistical, but it was the truth. “Not all novices have reached that level.”

A dangerous glint appeared in her eye, and her voice grew silky smooth again. “Well, then, perhaps we need more excellent training. Perhaps we should send *you* to St. Vladimir’s or some other academy so that you can improve your young colleagues’ education. My understanding is that your

upcoming assignment will be a permanent administrative one here at Court. If you wanted to help make this new decree successful, we could change that assignment and make you an instructor instead. It might speed up your return to a bodyguard assignment."

I gave her a dangerous smile of my own. "Do not," I warned, "try to threaten, bribe, or blackmail me. Ever. You won't like the consequences."

That might have been going too far. People in the audience exchanged startled looks. Some of their expressions were disgusted, as though they could expect nothing better of me. I recognized a few of those Moroi. They were ones I'd overheard talking about my relationship with Adrian and how the queen hated it. I also suspected a number of royals from last night's ceremony were here too. They'd seen Tatiana lead me out and no doubt thought my outburst and disrespect today were a type of revenge.

The Moroi weren't the only ones who reacted. Regardless of whether they shared my opinions, a few guardians stepped forward. I made sure to stay exactly where I was, and that, along with Tatiana's lack of fear, kept them in place.

"We're getting weary of this conversation," Tatiana said, switching to the royal *we*. "You can speak more—and do so in the proper manner—when we have our next meeting and open the floor to comments. For now, whether you like it or not, this resolution has been passed. It's law."

She's letting you off! Lissa's voice was back in my head. *Back away from this before you do something that'll get you in real trouble. Argue later.*

It was ironic because I'd been on the verge of exploding and letting my full rage out. Lissa's words stopped me—but not because of their content. It was Lissa herself. When Adrian and I had discussed the results earlier, I'd noted one piece of faulty logic.

"It wasn't a fair vote," I declared. "It wasn't legal."

"Are you a lawyer now, Miss Hathaway?" The queen was amused, and her dropping of my guardian title now was a blatant lack of respect. "If you're referring to the monarch's vote carrying more weight than others on the Council, then we can assure you that that has been Moroi law for centuries in such situations." She glanced at her fellow Council members, none of whom raised a protest. Even those who'd voted against her couldn't find fault with her point.

"Yeah, but the entire Council didn't vote," I said. "You've had an empty spot in the Council for the last few years—but not anymore." I turned and pointed at where my friends were sitting. "Vasilisa Dragomir is eighteen now and can fill her family's spot." In all of this chaos, her birthday had been overlooked, even by me.

The eyes in the room turned on Lissa—something she did *not* like. However, Lissa was used to being in the public eye. She knew what was expected of a royal, how to look and carry herself. So, rather than cringing, she sat up straight and stared ahead with a cool, regal look that said she could walk up to that table right now and demand her birthright. Whether it was that magnificent attitude alone or maybe a little spirit charisma, she was almost impossible to look away from. Her beauty had its usual luminous quality, and around the room, a lot of the faces held the same awe for her that I'd observed

around Court. Dimitri's transformation was still an enigma, but those who believed in it were indeed regarding her as some kind of saint. She was becoming larger than life in so many people's eyes, both with her family name and mysterious powers—and now the alleged ability to restore Strigoi.

Smug, I looked back at Tatiana. "Isn't eighteen the legal voting age?" *Checkmate, bitch.*

"Yes," she said cheerfully. "If the Dragomirs had a quorum."

I wouldn't say my stunning victory exactly shattered at that point, but it certainly lost a little of its luster. "A what?"

"A quorum. By law, for a Moroi family to have a Council vote, they must have a family. She does not. She's the only one."

I stared in disbelief. "What, you're saying she needs to go have a kid to get a vote?"

Tatiana grimaced. "Not now, of course. Someday, I'm sure. For a family to have a vote, they must have at least two members, one of whom must be over eighteen. It's Moroi law—again, a law that's been in the books for centuries."

A few people were exchanging confused and surprised looks. This was clearly not a law many were familiar with. Of course, this situation—a royal line reduced to one person—wasn't one that had occurred in recent history, if it had ever occurred at all.

"It's true," said Ariana Szelsky reluctantly. "I've read it."

Okay, *that* was when my stunning victory shattered. The Szelsky family was one I trusted, and Ariana was the older sister of the guy my mom protected. Ariana was a pretty bookish kind of person, and seeing as she'd voted against the guardian age change, it seemed unlikely she'd offer this piece of evidence if it weren't true.

With no more ammunition, I resorted to old standbys.

"That," I told Tatiana, "is the most fucked-up law I have ever heard."

That did it. The audience broke into shocked chatter, and Tatiana gave up on whatever pretense of friendliness she'd been clinging to. She beat the herald to any orders he might have given.

"Remove her!" shouted Tatiana. Even with the rapidly growing noise, her voice rang clearly through the room. "We will not tolerate this sort of vulgar behavior!"

I had guardians on me in a flash. Honestly, with how often I'd been dragged away from places lately, there was almost something comfortably familiar about it. I didn't fight the guardians as they led me to the door, but I also didn't let them take me without a few parting words.

"You could change the quorum law if you wanted, you sanctimonious bitch!" I yelled back. "You're twisting the law because you're selfish and afraid! You're making the worst mistake of your life. You'll regret it! Wait and see—you'll wish you'd never done it!"

I don't know if anyone heard my tirade because by then, the hall was back to the chaos it had been in when I entered. The guardians—three of them—didn't let go of me until we were outside. Once they released me, we all stood around awkwardly for a moment.

"What now?" I asked. I tried to keep the anger out of my voice. I was still furious and worked up, but it wasn't these guys' fault. "Are you going to lock

me up?" Seeing as it would bring me back to Dimitri, it would almost be a reward.

"They only said to remove you," one of the guardians pointed out. "No one said what to do with you after that."

Another guardian, old and grizzled but still fierce looking, gave me a wry look. "I'd take off while you can, before they really have a chance to punish you."

"Not that they won't find you if they really want to," added the first guardian.

With that, the three of them headed back inside, leaving me confused and upset. My body was still revved for a fight, and I was filled with the frustration I always experienced whenever I was faced with a situation I felt powerless in. All that yelling for nothing. I'd accomplished nothing.

"Rose?"

I shifted from my churning emotions and looked up at the building. The older guardian hadn't gone inside and still stood in the doorway. His face was stoic, but I thought I saw a twinkle in his eye. "For what it's worth," he told me, "I thought you were fantastic in there."

I didn't feel much like smiling, but my lips betrayed me. "Thanks," I said.

Well, maybe I'd accomplished one thing.

TWENTY-TWO

I DIDN'T TAKE THE GUY'S advice and tear off out of there, though I didn't exactly sit on the front step either. I lingered nearby in a cluster of cherry trees, figuring it would only be a matter of time before the assembly ended and people spilled out the doors. After several minutes passed and nothing happened, I flipped into Lissa's mind and discovered things were still in full force. Despite Tatiana declaring twice now that the session was over, people were still standing around and arguing in groups.

Tasha was standing in one such group with Lissa and Adrian, making one of the impassioned speeches she was so good at. Tasha might not be as coldly calculating as Tatiana was when it came to political moves, but Tasha did have a keen sense of ripples in the system and recognized opportunities when they came. She was against the age-lowering decree. She was for teaching Moroi to fight. Neither of those was getting her very far, so she jumped on the next best thing: Lissa.

"Why are we arguing among ourselves about how best to kill Strigoi when we can save them?" Tasha put one arm around Lissa and one around Adrian, drawing them both forward. Lissa still wore her serenely confident look, but Adrian looked ready to bolt if given half a chance. "Vasilisa—who, by the way, is indeed being denied her fair voice here, thanks to an archaic law—has shown that Strigoi can be brought back."

"That hasn't been proven," exclaimed one man in the crowd.

"Are you kidding?" asked a woman beside him. "My sister was with the group that brought him back. She says he's definitely a dhampir. He was even out in the sun!"

Tasha nodded in approval at the woman. "I was there as well. And now we have two spirit users capable of doing this for other Strigoi."

As much as I respected Tasha, I wasn't entirely with her on this. The amount of power—not to mention effort involved in the staking—that Lissa had required with Dimitri had been staggering. It had even temporarily hurt the bond. That didn't mean she couldn't do it again. Nor did it mean she wouldn't *want* to again. She was just naively compassionate enough to throw herself into the line of fire to help others. But I knew the more power a spirit user wielded, the quicker they'd travel down the road to insanity.

And Adrian . . . well, he was almost a nonissue here. Even if he wanted to go staking Strigoi, he didn't have the kind of healing power it would take to restore one—at least not now. It's wasn't uncommon for Moroi to use their elements in different ways. Some fire users, like Christian, had skilled control of flame itself. Others could only use their magic to, say, warm the air in a room. Likewise, Lissa and Adrian had their strengths with spirit. His greatest healing triumph was mending a fracture, and she still couldn't walk dreams, no matter how much she practiced.

So, really, Tasha had one spirit user capable of saving Strigoi, and that one could hardly transform legions of those monsters. Tasha did seem to recognize this a little.

"The Council shouldn't be wasting time with age laws," she continued. "We need to sink our resources into finding more spirit users and recruiting them to help save Strigoi." She fixed her gaze on someone in the crowd. "Martin, didn't your brother get turned against his will? With enough work, we could bring him back to you. Alive. Just like you knew him. Otherwise, he's just going to get staked when guardians find him—and of course he'll be slaughtering innocents along the way."

Yeah, Tasha was good. She could paint a good image and nearly brought that Martin guy to tears. She didn't really mention people who'd turned Strigoi willingly. Lissa, still standing with her, wasn't sure how she felt about the idea of a Strigoi-saving spirit army, but she did recognize how this was all part of several other plans Tasha had—including one to get Lissa voting rights.

Tasha played up Lissa's abilities and character, scoffing at what was clearly an outdated law from an era that never could have foreseen this situation. Tasha further pointed out that a full Council of twelve families would send a message to Strigoi everywhere about Moroi unity.

I didn't want to hear any more. I'd let Tasha wield her political magic and talk more to Lissa later. I was still so agitated about what had happened when I'd yelled at the Council that I couldn't stand to see that room anymore. I left her mind and returned to my own, yelping when I saw a face right in front of mine.

"Ambrose!"

One of the best-looking dhampirs on the planet—after Dimitri, of course—flashed me a gleaming, movie-star smile. "You were so still, I thought maybe you were trying to be a dryad."

I blinked. "A what?"

He gestured to the cherry trees. "Nature spirits. Beautiful women who become one with trees."

"I'm not sure if that was a compliment or not," I said. "But it's good to see you again."

Ambrose was a true oddity in our culture: a male dhampir who had neither taken guardian vows nor run off to hide among humans. Female dhampirs often chose not to join the guardians in order to focus on raising families. That's why we were so rare. But men? They had no excuse, as far as most people were concerned. Rather than skulk off in disgrace, however, Ambrose had chosen to stay and simply work for the Moroi another way. He was essentially a servant—a high-class one who served drinks at elite parties and gave massages to royal women. He also, if rumors were true, served Tatiana in physical ways. That was so creepy, though, I promptly put it out of my mind.

"You too," he told me. "But if you aren't communing with nature, what *are* you doing?"

"It's a long story. I kind of got thrown out of a Council meeting."

He looked impressed. "Literally thrown out?"

"Dragged, I guess. I'm surprised I haven't seen you around," I mused. "Of course, I've kind of been, um, distracted this last week."

"So I've heard," he said, giving me a sympathetic look. "Although, I actually have been away. Just got back last night."

"Just in time for the fun," I muttered.

The guileless look on his face told me hadn't heard about the decree yet. "What are you doing now?" he asked. "This doesn't look like punishment. Did you finish your sentence?"

"Something like that. I'm kind of waiting for someone now. Was just going to hang out in my room."

"Well, if you're killing time, why don't you come see Aunt Rhonda?"

"Rhonda?" I scowled. "No offense, but your aunt didn't really impress me with her abilities last time."

"None taken," he said cheerfully. "But she's been wondering about you. And Vasilisa. So, if you're just hanging around . . ."

I hesitated. He was right that I had nothing better to do right now. I was stuck on options with both Dimitri and the Council's idiotic resolutions. Yet Rhonda—his fortune-telling Moroi aunt—wasn't someone I really wanted to see again. Despite my glib words, the truth was that in retrospect, some of Rhonda's predictions *had* come true. I just didn't like what they'd been.

"Fine," I said, trying to look bored. "Make it fast."

He smiled again, like he could see through my ruse, and led me off to a building I'd been to once before. It housed a luxurious salon and spa frequented by royal Moroi. Lissa and I had had our nails done there, and as Ambrose and I wound our way through it to Rhonda's lair, I felt a strange pang within me. Manicures and pedicures . . . they seemed like the most trivial things in the world. But on that day, they'd been wonderful. Lissa and I had laughed and grown closer . . . just before the school was attacked and everything fell apart. . . .

Rhonda told fortunes in a back room that was far from the busy spa. Despite the seedy feel of it, she did a pretty brisk business and even had her own receptionist. Or, well, she used to. This time, the desk was empty, and Ambrose led me straight through to Rhonda's room. It looked exactly the same as before, like being inside a heart. Everything was red: the wallpaper, the decorations, and the cushions covering the floor.

Rhonda herself sat on the floor, eating a cup of yogurt, which seemed terribly ordinary for someone who allegedly wielded mystical powers. Curly black hair cascaded around her shoulders, making the large gold hoops in her ears gleam.

"Rose Hathaway," she said happily, setting the yogurt aside. "What a nice surprise."

"Shouldn't you have seen me coming?" I asked dryly.

Her lips twitched with amusement. "That's not my power."

"Sorry to interrupt your dinner," Ambrose said, gracefully folding his muscled body as he sat down. "But Rose isn't easy to catch hold of."

"I imagine not," she said. "I'm impressed you got her to come at all. What can I do for you today, Rose?"

I shrugged and sank down beside Ambrose. "I don't know. I'm only here because Ambrose talked me into it."

"She didn't think your last reading was very good," he said.

"Hey!" I shot him a chastising look. "That's not exactly what I said."

Last time, Lissa and Dimitri had been with me. Rhonda's tarot cards had shown Lissa crowned with power and light—no surprise. Rhonda had said Dimitri would lose what he valued most, and he had: his soul. And me? Rhonda had bluntly told me that I'd kill the undead. I'd scoffed at that, knowing I had a lifetime of Strigoi-killing ahead of me. Now I wondered if "undead" meant the Strigoi part of Dimitri. Even if I hadn't driven the stake, I'd certainly played a major role.

"Maybe another reading would help the other one make more sense?" she offered.

My mind was putting together another fraud psychic joke, which was why it was so astonishing when my mouth said, "That's the problem. The other one *did* make sense. I'm afraid . . . I'm afraid of what else the cards will show."

"The cards don't make the future," she said gently. "If something's meant to be, it'll be, regardless of whether you see it here. And even then . . . well, the future is always changing. If we had no choices, there'd be no point in living."

"See now," I said flippantly, "that's the kind of vague gypsy response I was hoping for."

"*Roma*," she corrected. "Not gypsy." Despite my snark, she still seemed to be in a good mood. Easygoing attitudes must have run in their family. "Do you want the cards or not?"

Did I? She was right about one thing—the future would unfold with or without me seeing it in the cards. And even if the cards showed it, I probably wouldn't understand it until afterward.

"Okay," I said. "Just for fun. I mean, last time was probably a lucky guess."

Rhonda rolled her eyes but said nothing as she began shuffling her tarot deck. She did it with such precision that the cards seemed to move themselves. When she finally stopped, she handed the deck to me to cut. I did, and she put it back together.

"We did three cards before," she said. "We've got time to do more if you'd like. Five, perhaps?"

"The more there are, the more likely it is that anything can get explained."

"If you don't believe in them, then it shouldn't be an issue."

"Okay, then. Five."

She grew serious as she flipped out the cards, her eyes carefully studying them. Two of the cards had come out upside down. I didn't take that as a good sign. Last time, I'd learned that it made seemingly happy cards . . . well, not so happy.

The first one was one the Two of Cups, showing a man and a woman together in a grassy, flower-filled field while the sun shone above them. Naturally, it was upside down.

"Cups are tied to emotions," Rhonda explained. "The Two of Cups shows a union, a perfect love and blossoming of joyous emotions. But since it's inverted—"

"You know what?" I interrupted. "I think I'm getting the hang of this. You can skip that one. I have a good idea what it means." It might as well have been Dimitri and me on that card, the cup empty and full of heartache. . . . I really didn't want to hear Rhonda analyze what was already tearing my heart

up.

So she went on to the next one: the Queen of Swords, also upside down.

"Cards like this refer to specific people," Rhonda told me. The Queen of Swords looked very imperious, with auburn hair and silver robes. "The Queen of Swords is clever. She thrives on knowledge, can outwit her enemies, and is ambitious."

I sighed. "But upside down . . ."

"Upside down," said Rhonda, "all of those traits get twisted. She's still smart, still trying to get her way . . . but she's doing it through insincere ways. There's a lot of hostility and deception here. I'd say you have an enemy."

"Yeah," I said, eyeing the crown. "I think I can guess who. I just called her a sanctimonious bitch."

Rhonda didn't comment and moved on to the next one. It was facing the right way, but I kind of wished it wasn't. It had a whole bunch of swords stuck in the ground and a woman tied and blindfolded to one. Eight of Swords.

"Oh, come on," I exclaimed. "What is it with me and swords? You gave me one this depressing last time." It had shown a woman weeping in front of a wall of swords.

"That was the Nine of Swords," she agreed. "It could always be worse."

"I have a hard time believing that."

She picked up the rest of the deck and scanned through it, finally pulling out one card. The Ten of Swords. "You could have drawn this." It showed a dead guy lying on the ground with a bunch of swords driven through him.

"Point taken," I said. Ambrose chuckled beside me. "What's the nine mean?"

"The nine is being trapped. Unable to get out of a situation. It can also mean slander or accusation. Summoning courage to escape something." I glanced back at the queen, thinking of the things I'd said in the Council room. Those would definitely count as accusations. And being trapped? Well, there was always the possibility of a lifetime of paperwork . . .

I sighed. "Okay, what's the next one?" It was the best-looking one in the bunch, the Six of Swords. It had a bunch of people in a boat, rowing off over moonlit water.

"A journey," she said.

"I was just on a journey. A few of them." I eyed her suspiciously. "Man, this isn't, like, some kind of a spiritual journey is it?"

Ambrose laughed again. "Rose, I wish you'd get tarot readings every day."

Rhonda ignored him. "If it were in cups, maybe. But swords are tangible. Action. A true, out-and-about journey."

Where on earth would I go? Did it mean I was traveling to the Academy like Tatiana had suggested? Or was it possible that, in spite of all my rule breaking and calling her royal highness names, I might actually get an assignment after all? One away from Court?

"You could be looking for something. It may be a physical journey combined with a spiritual journey," she said, which sounded like a total way to cover her ass. "This last one . . ." Her eyebrows knitted into a frown at the fifth card. "This is hidden from me."

I peered at it. "The Page of Cups. Seems pretty obvious. It's a page with, um, cups."

“Usually I have a clear vision. . . . The cards speak to me in how they connect. This one’s not clear.”

“The only thing that’s not clear is whether it’s a girl or a boy.” The person on the card looked young but had hair and an androgynous face that made the gender impossible to determine. The blue tights and tunic didn’t help, though the sunny field in the background seemed promising.

“It can be either,” Rhonda said. “It’s the lowest in rank of the cards that represent people in each suit: King, Queen, Knight, and then Page. Whoever the page is, it’s someone trustworthy and creative. Optimistic. It could mean someone who goes on the journey with you—or maybe the reason for your journey.”

Whatever optimism or truth I’d had in the cards pretty much disappeared with that. Given that she’d just said about a hundred things it could be, I didn’t really consider it authoritative. Usually, she noticed my skepticism, but her attention was still on the card as she frowned.

“But I just can’t tell. . . . There’s a cloud around it. Why? It doesn’t make sense.”

Something about her confusion sent a chill down my spine. I always told myself this was fake, but if she’d been making it all up . . . well, wouldn’t she have made something up about the Page of Cups? She wasn’t putting on a very convincing act if this last card was making her question herself. The thought that maybe there was some mystical force out there blocking her sobered up my cynical attitude.

With a sigh, she looked up at last. “Sorry that’s all I can tell you. Did the rest help?”

I scanned the cards. Heartache. An enemy. Accusations. Entrapment. Travel. “Some of it tells me things I already know. The rest leaves me with more questions.”

She smiled knowingly. “That’s how it usually is.”

I thanked her for the reading, secretly glad I didn’t have to pay for it. Ambrose walked me out, and I tried to shake off the mood Rhonda’s fortune had left me in. I had enough problems in my life without letting a bunch of stupid cards bother me.

“You going to be okay?” he asked when we finally emerged. The sun was climbing higher. The Royal Court would be going to bed soon, ending what had been a turbulent day. “I . . . I wouldn’t have brought you if I’d known how much it would upset you.”

“No, no,” I said. “It’s not the cards. Not exactly. There’s a bunch of other things going on . . . one you should probably know about.”

I hadn’t wanted to bring up the decree when we’d first run into each other, but as a dhampir, he had a right to hear about what had happened. His face was perfectly still as I spoke, save for his dark brown eyes, which grew wider while the story progressed.

“There’s some mistake,” he said at last. “They wouldn’t do that. They wouldn’t do that to sixteen-year-olds.”

“Yeah, well, I didn’t think so either, but they were apparently serious enough about it to throw me out when I, um, questioned it.”

“I can just imagine your ‘questioning.’ All this’ll do is make more dhampirs

drop out of the guardians . . . unless, of course, being that young makes them more open for brainwashing."

"Kind of a sensitive area for you, huh?" I asked. After all, he too was a guardian drop-out.

He shook his head. "Staying in this society was nearly impossible for me. If any of those kids do decide to drop out, they won't have the powerful friends I did. They'll be outcasts. That's all this'll do. Either kill off teens or cut them off from their own people."

I wondered what powerful friends he'd had, but this was hardly the time to learn his life history. "Well, that royal bitch doesn't seem to care."

The thoughtful, distracted look in his eyes suddenly sharpened. "Don't call her that," he warned with a glare. "This isn't her fault."

Whoa. Cue surprise. I'd almost never seen sexy, charismatic Ambrose be anything but friendly. "Of course it's her fault! She's the supreme ruler of the Moroi, remember?"

His scowl deepened. "The Council voted too. Not her alone."

"Yeah, but she voted in *support* of this decree. She swayed the vote."

"There must have been a reason. You don't know her like I do. She wouldn't want this kind of thing."

I started to ask if he was out of his mind but paused when I remembered his relationship with the queen. Those romantic rumors made me queasy, but if they were true, I supposed he might have legitimate concern for her. I also decided it was probably best that I *didn't* know her the way he did. The bite marks on his neck certainly indicated some sort of intimate activity.

"Whatever's going on between you is your business," I told him calmly, "but she's used it to trick you into thinking she's someone she isn't. She did it to me too, and I fell for it. It's all a scam."

"I don't believe it," he said, still stone-faced. "As queen, she's put into all sorts of tough situations. There must be more to it—she'll change the decree, I'm certain of it."

"As queen," I said, imitating his tone, "she should have the ability to—"

My words fell off as a voice spoke in my head. Lissa's.

Rose, you're going to want to see this. But you have to promise not to cause any trouble. Lissa flashed a location to me, along with a sense of urgency.

Ambrose's hard look shifted to one of concern. "Are you okay?"

"I—yeah. Lissa needs me." I sighed. "Look, I don't want us to fight, okay? Obviously we've each got different views of the situation . . . but I think we both agree on the same key point."

"That kids shouldn't be sent off to die? Yeah, we can agree on that." We smiled tentatively at each other, and the anger between us diffused. "I'll talk to her, Rose. I'll find out the real story and let you know, okay?"

"Okay." I had a hard time believing anyone could really have a heart-to-heart with Tatiana, but again, there might be more to their relationship than I realized. "Thanks. It was good seeing you."

"You too. Now go—go to Lissa."

I needed no further urging. Along with the sense of urgency, Lissa had passed one other message through the bond that sent my feet flying: *It's about Dimitri.*

TWENTY-THREE

I DIDN'T NEED THE BOND to find Lissa. The crowd tipped me off to where she—and Dimitri—were.

My first thought was that some kind of stoning or medieval mobbing was going on. Then I realized that the people standing around were simply watching something. I pushed through them, heedless of the dirty looks I got, until I stood in the front row of the onlookers. What I found brought me to a halt.

Lissa and Dimitri sat side by side on a bench while three Moroi and—yikes—Hans sat opposite them. Guardians stood scattered around them, tense and ready to jump in if things went bad, apparently. Before I even heard a word, I knew exactly what was going on. This was an interrogation, an investigation to determine what Dimitri was exactly.

Under most circumstances, this would be a weird place for a formal investigation. It was, ironically, one of the courtyards Eddie and I had worked on, the one that stood in the shadow of the statue of the young queen. The Court's church stood nearby. This grassy area wasn't exactly holy ground, but it was close enough to the church that people could run to it in an emergency. Crucifixes didn't hurt Strigoi, but they couldn't cross over into a church, mosque, or any other sacred place. Between that and the morning sun, this was probably as safe a location and time as officials could muster up to question Dimitri.

I recognized one of the Moroi questioners, Reece Tarus. He was related to Adrian on his mom's side but had also spoken in favor of the age decree. So I took an instant dislike to him, particularly considering the haughty tone he used toward Dimitri.

"Do you find the sun blinding?" asked Reece. He had a clipboard in front of him and appeared to be going down a checklist.

"No," said Dimitri, voice smooth and controlled. His attention was totally on his questioners. He had no clue I was there, and I kind of liked it that way. I wanted to just gaze at him for a moment and admire his features.

"What if you stare into the sun?"

Dimitri hesitated, and I'm not sure anyone but me caught the sudden glint in his eyes—or knew what it meant. The question was stupid, and I think Dimitri—maybe, just maybe—wanted to laugh. With his normal skill, he maintained his composure.

"Anyone would go blind staring into the sun long enough," he replied. "I'd go through what anyone else here would."

Reece didn't seem to like the answer, but there was no fault in the logic. He pursed his lips together and moved on to the next question. "Does it scald your skin?"

"Not at the moment."

Lissa glanced over at the crowd and noticed me. She couldn't feel me the way I could through our bond, but sometimes it seemed she had an uncanny sense of when I was around. I think she sensed my aura if I was close enough, since all spirit users claimed the field of light around shadow-kissed people was very distinct. She gave me a small smile before turning back to the questioning.

Dimitri, ever vigilant, noticed her tiny movement. He looked over to see what had distracted her, caught sight of me, and faltered a little on Reece's next question, which was, "Have you noticed whether your eyes occasionally turn red?"

"I . . ." Dimitri stared at me for several moments and then jerked his head back toward Reece. "I haven't been around many mirrors. But I think my guards would have noticed, and none of them have said anything."

Nearby, one of the guardians made a small noise. He barely managed to keep a straight face, but I think he too had wanted to snicker at the ridiculous line of questioning. I couldn't recall his name, but when I'd been at Court long ago, he and Dimitri had chatted and laughed quite a bit when together. If an old friend was starting to believe Dimitri was a dhampir again, then that had to be a good sign.

The Moroi next to Reece glared around, trying to figure out where the noise had come from, but discovered nothing. The questioning continued, this time having to do with whether Dimitri would step into the church if they asked him to.

"I can go right now," he told them. "I'll go to services tomorrow if you want." Reece made another note, no doubt wondering if he could get the priest to douse Dimitri in holy water.

"This is all a distraction," a familiar voice said in my ear. "Smoke and mirrors. That's what Aunt Tasha says." Christian now stood beside me.

"It needs to be done," I murmured back. "They have to see that he isn't Strigoi anymore."

"Yeah, but they've barely signed the age law. The queen gave the go-ahead for this as soon as the Council's session let out because it's sensational and will make people pay attention to something new. It was how they finally got the hall cleared. 'Hey, go look at the sideshow!'"

I could almost hear Tasha saying that word for word. Regardless, there was truth to it. I felt conflicted. I wanted Dimitri to be free. I wanted him to be the way he used to be. Yet I didn't appreciate Tatiana doing this for her own political gain and not because she actually cared about what was right. This was possibly the most monumental thing to happen in our history. It needed to be treated as such. Dimitri's fate shouldn't be a convenient "sideshow" to distract everyone from an unfair law.

Reece was now asking both Lissa and Dimitri to describe exactly what they'd experienced the night of the raid. I had a feeling this was something they'd recounted quite a bit. Although Dimitri had been the picture of nonthreatening composure so far, I still sensed that gray feel to him, the guilt and torment he felt over what he had done as a Strigoi. Yet, when he turned to listen to Lissa tell her version of the story, his face lit up with wonder. Awe. Worship.

Jealousy flashed through me. His feelings weren't romantic, but it didn't matter. What mattered was that he had rejected me but regarded her as the greatest thing in the world. He'd told me never to talk to him again and sworn he'd do anything for her. Again I felt that petulant sense of being wronged. I refused to believe that he couldn't love me anymore. It wasn't possible, not after all he and I had been through together. Not after everything we'd felt for each other.

"They sure seem close," Christian noted, a suspicious note in his voice. I had no time to tell him his worries were unfounded because I wanted to hear what Dimitri had to say.

The story of his change was hard for others to follow, largely because spirit was still so misunderstood. Reece got as much out of it as he could and then turned the questioning over to Hans. Hans, ever practical, had no need for extensive interrogation. He was a man of action, not words. Gripping a stake in his hand, he asked Dimitri to touch it. The standing guardians tensed, probably in case Dimitri tried to grab the stake and go on a rampage.

Instead, Dimitri calmly reached out and held the top of the stake for a few moments. There was a collective intake of breath as everyone waited for him to scream in pain since Strigoi couldn't touch charmed silver. Instead, Dimitri looked bored.

Then he astonished them all. Drawing his hand back, he held out the bottom of his muscled forearm toward Hans. With the sunny weather, Dimitri was wearing a T-shirt, leaving the skin there bare.

"Cut me with it," he told Hans.

Hans arched an eyebrow. "Cutting you with this will hurt no matter what you are."

"It would be unbearable if I were a Strigoi," Dimitri pointed out. His face was hard and determined. He was the Dimitri I'd seen in battle, the Dimitri who never backed down. "Do it. Don't go easy on me."

Hans didn't react at first. Clearly, this was an unexpected course of action. Decision finally flashed across his features, and he struck out, swiping the stake's point against Dimitri's skin. As Dimitri had requested, Hans didn't hold back. The point dug deep, and blood welled up. Several Moroi, not used to seeing blood (unless they were drinking it), gasped at the violence. As one, we all leaned forward.

Dimitri's face showed he definitely felt pain, but charmed silver on a Strigoi wouldn't just hurt—it would burn. I'd cut a lot of Strigoi with stakes and heard them scream in agony. Dimitri grimaced and bit his lip as the blood flowed over his arm. I swear, there was pride in his eyes at his ability to stay strong through that.

When it became obvious he wouldn't start flailing, Lissa reached toward him. I sensed her intentions; she wanted to heal him.

"Wait," said Hans. "A Strigoi would heal from this in minutes."

I had to give Hans credit. He'd worked two tests into one. Dimitri shot him a grateful look, and Hans gave a small nod of acknowledgment. Hans believed, I realized. Whatever his faults, Hans truly thought Dimitri was a dhampir again. I would love him forever for that, no matter how much filing he made me do.

So, we all stood there watching poor Dimitri bleed. It was kind of sick, really, but the test worked. It was obvious to everyone that the cut wasn't going anywhere. Lissa was finally given leave to heal it, and that caused a bigger reaction among the crowd. Murmurs of wonder surrounded me, and those enraptured goddess-worshipping looks showed on people's faces.

Reece glanced at the crowd. "Does anyone have any questions to add to ours?"

No one spoke. They were all dumbfounded by the sights before them.

Well, someone had to step forward. Literally.

"I do," I said, striding toward them.

No, Rose, begged Lissa.

Dimitri wore an equally displeased look. Actually, so did almost everyone sitting near him. When Reece's gaze fell on me, I had a feeling he was seeing me in the Council room all over again, calling Tatiana a sanctimonious bitch. I put my hands on my hips, not caring what they thought. This was my chance to force Dimitri to acknowledge me.

"When you *used to be* Strigoi," I began, making it clear that I believed that was in the past, "you were very well connected. You knew about the whereabouts of lots of Strigoi in Russia and the U.S., right?"

Dimitri eyed me carefully, trying to figure out where I was going. "Yes."

"Do you still know them?"

Lissa frowned. She thought I was going to inadvertently implicate Dimitri as still being in contact with other Strigoi.

"Yes," he said. "So long as none of them have moved." The answer came more swiftly this time. I wasn't sure if he'd guessed my tactic or if he just trusted that my Rose-logic would go somewhere useful.

"Would you share that information with the guardians?" I asked. "Would you tell us all the Strigoi hideouts so that we could strike out against them?"

That got a reaction. Proactively seeking Strigoi was as hotly debated as the other issues going around right now, with strong opinions on all sides. I heard those opinions reiterated behind me in the crowd, some people saying I was suggesting suicide while others acknowledged we had a valuable tool.

Dimitri's eyes lit up. It wasn't the adoring look he often gave Lissa, but I didn't care. It was similar to the ones we used to share, in those moments where we understood each other so perfectly, we didn't even need to vocalize what we were thinking. That connection flashed between us, as did his approval—and gratitude.

"Yes," he replied, voice strong and loud. "I can tell you everything I know about Strigoi plans and locations. I'd face them with you or stay behind—whichever you wanted."

Hans leaned forward in his chair, expression eager. "That could be invaluable." More points for Hans. He was on the side of hitting out at Strigoi before they came to us.

Reece flushed—or maybe he was just feeling the sun. In their efforts to see if Dimitri would burn up in the light, the Moroi were exposing themselves to discomfort. "Now hold on," Reece exclaimed over the increasing noise. "That has never been a tactic we endorse. Besides, he could always lie—"

His protests were cut off by a feminine scream. A small Moroi boy, no more

than six, had suddenly broken from the crowd and run toward us. It was his mother who had screamed. I moved in to stop him, grabbing his arm. I wasn't afraid that Dimitri would hurt him, only that the boy's mother would have a heart attack. She came forward, face grateful.

"I have questions," the boy, obviously trying to be brave, said in a small voice.

His mother reached for him, but I held up my hand. "Hang on a sec." I smiled down at him. "What do you want to ask? Go ahead." Behind him, fear flashed over his mother's face, and she cast an anxious look at Dimitri. "I won't let anything happen to him," I whispered, though she had no way of knowing I could back that up. Nonetheless, she stayed where she was.

Reece rolled his eyes. "This is ridic—"

"If you're Strigoi," the boy interrupted loudly, "then why don't you have horns? My friend Jeffrey said Strigoi have horns."

Dimitri's eyes fell not on the boy but on me for a moment. Again, that spark of knowing shot between us. Then, face smooth and serious, Dimitri turned to the boy and answered, "Strigoi don't have horns. And even if they did, it wouldn't matter because I'm not Strigoi."

"Strigoi have red eyes," I explained. "Do his eyes look red?"

The boy leaned forward. "No. They're brown."

"What else do you know about Strigoi?" I asked.

"They have fangs like us," the boy replied.

"Do you have fangs?" I asked Dimitri in a singsong voice. I had a feeling this was already-covered territory, but it took on a new feel when asked from a child's perspective.

Dimitri smiled—a full, wonderful smile that caught me off guard. Those kinds of smiles were so rare from him. Even when happy or amused, he usually only gave half smiles. This was genuine, showing all his teeth, which were as flat as those of any human or dhampir. No fangs.

The boy looked impressed. "Okay, Jonathan," said his mother anxiously. "You asked. Let's go now."

"Strigoi are super strong," continued Jonathan, who possibly aspired to be a future lawyer. "Nothing can hurt them." I didn't bother correcting him, for fear he'd want to see a stake shoved through Dimitri's heart. In fact, it was kind of amazing that Reece hadn't already requested that. Jonathan fixed Dimitri with a piercing gaze. "Are *you* super strong? Can you be hurt?"

"Of course I can," replied Dimitri. "I'm strong, but all sorts of things can still hurt me."

And then, being Rose Hathaway, I said something I really shouldn't have to the boy. "You should go punch him and find out."

Jonathan's mother screamed again, but he was a fast little bastard, eluding her grasp. He ran up to Dimitri before anyone could stop him—well, I could have—and pounded his tiny fist against Dimitri's knee.

Then, with the same reflexes that allowed him to dodge enemy attacks, Dimitri immediately feinted falling backward, as though Jonathan had knocked him over. Clutching his knee, Dimitri groaned as though he were in terrible pain.

Several people laughed, and by then, one of the other guardians had caught

hold of Jonathan and returned him to his near-hysterical mother. As he was being dragged away, Jonathan glanced over his shoulder at Dimitri. “He doesn’t seem very strong to me. I don’t think he’s a Strigoi.”

This caused more laughter, and the third Moroi interrogator, who’d been quiet, snorted and rose from his seat. “I’ve seen all I need to. I don’t think he should walk around unguarded, but he’s no Strigoi. Give him a real place to stay and just keep guards on him until further decisions are made.”

Reece shot up. “But—”

The other man waved him off. “Don’t waste any more time. It’s hot, and I want to go to bed. I’m not saying I understand what happened, but this is the least of our problems right now, not with half the Council wanting to rip the other half’s heads off over the age decree. If anything, what we’ve seen today is a good thing—miraculous, even. It could alter the way we’ve lived. I’ll report back to Her Majesty.”

And like that, the group began dispersing, but there was wonder on some of their faces. They too were beginning to realize that if what had happened to Dimitri was real, then everything we’d ever known about Strigoi was about to change. The guardians stayed with Dimitri, of course, as he and Lissa rose. I immediately moved toward them, eager to bask in our victory. When he’d been “knocked over” by Jonathan’s tiny punch, Dimitri had given me a small smile, and my heart had leapt. I’d known then that I’d been right. He did still have feelings for me. But now, in the blink of an eye, that rapport was gone. Seeing me walk toward them, Dimitri’s face grew cold and guarded again.

Rose, said Lissa through the bond. *Go away now. Leave him alone.*

“The hell I will,” I said, both answering her aloud and addressing him. “I just furthered your case.”

“We were doing fine without you,” said Dimitri stiffly.

“Oh yeah?” I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “You seemed pretty grateful a couple minutes ago when I thought up the idea of you helping us against Strigoi.”

Dimitri turned to Lissa. His voice was low, but it carried to me. “I don’t want to see her.”

“You have to!” I exclaimed. A few of the departing people paused to see what the racket was about. “You can’t ignore me.”

“Make her go away,” Dimitri growled.

“I’m not—”

ROSE!

Lissa shouted in my head, shutting me up. Those piercing jade eyes stared me down. *Do you want to help him or not? Standing here and yelling at him is going to make him even more upset! Is that what you want? Do you want people to see that? See him get mad and yell back at you just so you don’t feel invisible? They need to see him calm. They need to see him . . . normal. It’s true—you did just help. But if you don’t walk away right now, you could ruin everything.*

I stared at them both aghast, my heart pounding. Her words had all been in my mind, but Lissa might as well have strode up to me and chewed me out aloud. My temper shot up even more. I wanted to go rant at both of them, but the truth of her words penetrated through my anger. Starting a scene would not help Dimitri. Was it fair that they were sending me away? Was it fair that

the two of them were teaming up and ignoring what I'd just done? No. But I wasn't going to let my hurt pride screw up what I'd just achieved. People had to accept Dimitri.

I shot them both looks that made my feelings clear and then stormed away. Lissa's feelings immediately changed to sympathy through the bond, but I blocked them out. I didn't want to hear it.

I'd barely cleared the church's grounds when I ran into Daniella Ivashkov. Sweat was starting to smudge her beautifully applied makeup, making me think she'd been out here for a while watching the Dimitri-spectacle too. She appeared to have a couple friends with her, but they kept their distance and chatted amongst themselves when she stopped in front of me. Swallowing my anger, I reminded myself she'd done nothing to piss me off. I forced a smile.

"Hi, Lady Ivashkov."

"Daniella," she said kindly. "No titles."

"Sorry. It's still a weird thing."

She nodded toward where Dimitri and Lissa were departing with his guards. "I saw you there, just now. You helped his case, I think. Poor Reece was pretty flustered."

I recalled that Reece was related to her. "Oh . . . I'm sorry. I didn't mean to —"

"Don't apologize. Reece is my uncle, but in this case, I believe in what Vasilisa and Mr. Belikov are saying."

Despite how angry Dimitri had just made me, my gut instinct resented the dropping of his "guardian" title. Yet I could forgive her, considering her attitude.

"You . . . you believe Lissa healed him? That Strigoi can be restored?" I was realizing there were lots of people who believed. The crowd had just demonstrated as much, and Lissa was still building her following of devotees. Somehow, my line of thinking always tended to assume all royals were against me. Daniella's smile turned wry.

"My own son is a spirit user. Since accepting that, I've had to accept a lot of other things I didn't believe were possible."

"I suppose you would," I admitted. Beyond her, I noticed a Moroi man standing near some trees. His eyes occasionally fell on us, and I could have sworn I'd seen him before. Daniella's next words turned my attention back to her.

"Speaking of Adrian . . . he was looking for you earlier. It's short notice now, but some of Nathan's relatives are having a late cocktail party in about an hour, and Adrian wanted you to go." Another party. Was that all anyone ever did here at Court? Massacres, miracles . . . it didn't matter. Everything was cause for a party, I thought bitterly.

I'd probably been with Ambrose and Rhonda when Adrian went searching. It was interesting. In passing on the invitation, Daniella was also saying that she wanted me to go. Unfortunately, I had a hard time being as open to it. Nathan's family meant the Ivashkovs, and they wouldn't be so friendly.

"Will the queen be there?" I asked suspiciously.

"No, she has other engagements."

"Are you sure? No unexpected visits?"

She laughed. “No, I’m certain of it. Rumor has it that you two being in the same room together . . . isn’t such a good idea.”

I could only imagine the stories going around about my Council performance, particularly since Adrian’s father had been there to witness it.

“No, not after that ruling. What she did . . .” The anger I’d felt earlier began to blaze again. “It was unforgivable.” That weird guy by the tree was still waiting around. Why?

Daniella didn’t confirm or deny my statement, and I wondered where she stood on the issue. “She’s still quite fond of you.”

I scoffed. “I have a hard time believing that.” Usually, people who yelled at you in public weren’t too “fond” of you, and even Tatiana’s cool composure had cracked near the end of our spat.

“It’s true. This will blow over, and there might even be a chance for you to be assigned to Vasilisa.”

“You can’t be serious,” I exclaimed. I should have known better. Daniella Ivashkov didn’t really seem like the joking type, but I really did believe I’d crossed the line with Tatiana.

“After everything that’s happened, they don’t want to waste good guardians. Besides, she doesn’t want there to be animosity between you.”

“Yeah? Well, I don’t want her bribery! If she thinks putting Dimitri out there and dangling a royal job is going to change my mind, she’s wrong. She’s a lying, scheming—”

I stopped abruptly. My voice had gone loud enough that Daniella’s nearby friends were now staring. And I really didn’t want to say the names I thought Tatiana deserved in front of Daniella.

“Sorry,” I said. I attempted civility. “Tell Adrian I’ll come to the party . . . but do you really want me to go? After I crashed the ceremony the other night? And after, um, other things I’ve done?”

She shook her head. “What happened at the ceremony is as much Adrian’s fault as it is yours. It’s done, and Tatiana let it go. This party’s a much more lighthearted event, and if he wants you there, then I want him to be happy.”

“I’ll go shower and change now and meet him at your place in an hour.”

She was tactful enough to ignore my earlier outburst. “Wonderful. I know he’ll be happy to hear that.”

I declined to tell her that I was actually happy about the thought of flaunting myself in front of some Ivashkovs in the hopes that it would get back to Tatiana. I no longer believed for an instant that she accepted what was going on with Adrian and me or that she would let my outburst blow over. And truthfully, I did want to see him. We hadn’t had much time to talk recently.

After Daniella and her friends left, I figured it was time to get to the bottom of things. I headed straight over to the Moroi who’d been lurking around, hands on my hips.

“Okay,” I demanded. “Who are you, and what do you want?”

He was only a few years older than me and didn’t seem at all fazed by my tough-girl attitude. He crooked me a smile, and I again pondered where I’d seen him.

“I’ve got a message for you,” he said. “And some gifts.”

He handed over a tote bag. I looked inside and found a laptop, some cords, and several pieces of paper. I stared up at him in disbelief.

"What's this?"

"Something you need to get a move on—and not let anyone else know about. The note will explain everything."

"Don't play spy movie with me! I'm not doing anything until you—" His face clicked. I'd seen him back at St. Vladimir's, around the time of my graduation—always hovering in the background. I groaned, suddenly understanding the secretive nature—and cocky attitude. "You work for Abe."

TWENTY-FOUR

THE MAN GRINNED. "YOU MAKE that sound like a bad thing." I made a face and looked back into the techno-bag with new appreciation. "What's going on?"

"I'm the messenger. I just run errands for Mr. Mazur."

"Is that a nice way of saying you spy for him? Find out everyone's dirty secrets so that he can use them against people and keep playing his games?" Abe seemed to know everything about everyone—especially royal politics. How else could he manage it without having eyes and ears everywhere? Say, at Court? For all I knew, he had my room wired with microphones.

"Spying's a harsh word." I notice the guy didn't deny it. "Besides, he pays well. And he's a good boss." He turned from me, job done, but gave one last warning. "Like I said—it's time sensitive. Read the note as soon as you can."

I had half a mind to throw it at the guy. I was getting used to the idea of being Abe's daughter, but that didn't mean I wanted to get tied up in some wacky scheme of his. A bag of hardware seemed foreboding.

Nonetheless, I hauled it back to my suite and emptied the contents onto my bed. There were a few sheets of paper, the top one being a typed cover letter.

Rose,

I hope Tad was able to get this to you in a timely manner. And I hope you weren't too mean to him. I'm doing this on behalf of someone who wants to speak to you about an urgent matter. However, it's a conversation that no one else must hear. The laptop and satellite modem in this bag will allow you to have a private discussion, so long as you're in a private location. I've included step-by-step instructions on how to configure it. Your meeting will take place at 7 a.m.

There was no name at the bottom, but I didn't need one. I set the letter down and stared at the jumble of cords. Seven was less than an hour away.

"Oh, come *on*, old man," I exclaimed.

To Abe's credit, the accompanying papers did have very basic directions that didn't require a computer engineer's insight. The only problem was, there were a lot of them, detailing where each cord went, what password to log in with, how to configure the modem, and so on. For a moment I considered ignoring it all. Yet when someone like Abe used the word *urgent*, it made me think maybe I shouldn't be so hasty in my dismissal.

So, bracing myself for some technical acrobatics, I set to following his instructions. It took almost the entire time I had, but I managed to hook up the modem and camera and access the secure program that would allow me to video-conference with Abe's mysterious contact. I finished with a few minutes to spare and waited the time out by staring at a black window in the middle of the screen, wondering what I'd gotten myself into.

At exactly seven, the window came to life, and a familiar—but unexpected—face appeared.

“Sydney?” I asked in surprise.

The video had that same, slightly jerky feel most Internet feeds had, but nonetheless, the face of my (kind of) friend Sydney Sage smiled back at me. Hers was a dry-humored smile, but that was typical of her.

“Good morning,” she said, stifling a yawn. From the state of her chin-length blond hair, it was likely she’d just gotten out of bed. Even in the poor resolution, the golden lily tattoo on her cheek gleamed. All Alchemists had that same tattoo. It consisted of ink and Moroi blood, imparting Moroi good health and longevity to the wearer. It also had a bit of compulsion mixed in to keep the Alchemists’ secret society from revealing anything they shouldn’t about vampires.

“Evening,” I said. “Not morning.”

“We can argue your messed-up unholy schedule some other time,” she said. “That’s not what I’m here for.”

“What *are* you here for?” I asked, still astonished to see her. The Alchemists did their jobs almost reluctantly, and while Sydney liked me better than most Moroi or dhampirs, she wasn’t the type to make friendly phone (or video) calls. “Wait . . . you can’t be in Russia. Not if it’s morning . . .” I tried to remember the time change. Yes, for humans over there, the sun would be down or about to be right now.

“I’m back in my native country,” she said with mock grandeur. “Got a new post in New Orleans.”

“Whoa, nice.” Sydney had hated being assigned to Russia, but my impression had been she was stuck there until finishing her Alchemist internship. “How’d you manage that?”

Her small smile turned to an expression of discomfort. “Oh, well. Abe, um, kind of did me a favor. He made it happen.”

“You made a deal with him?” Sydney must have *really* hated Russia. And Abe’s influence must have really been deep if he could affect a human organization. “What did you give him in return? Your soul?” Making a joke like that to someone as religious as her wasn’t very appropriate. Of course, I think she thought Moroi and dhampirs ate souls, so maybe my comment wasn’t too out there.

“That’s the thing,” she said. “It was kind of an ‘I’ll let you know when I need a favor in the future’ arrangement.”

“Sucker,” I said.

“Hey,” she snapped. “I don’t have to be doing this. I’m actually doing *you* a favor by talking to you.”

“Why *are* you talking to me exactly?” I wanted to question her more about her open-ended deal with the devil but figured that would get me disconnected.

She sighed and brushed some hair out of her face. “I need to ask you something. And I swear I won’t tell on you . . . I just need to know the truth so that we don’t waste our time on something.”

“Okay . . .” *Please don’t ask me about Victor*, I prayed.

“Have you broken into any place lately?”

Damn. I kept my face perfectly neutral. “What do you mean?”

“The Alchemists had some records stolen recently,” she explained. She was

all business-serious now. “And everyone’s going crazy trying to figure out who did it—and why.”

Mentally, I breathed a sigh of relief. Okay. It wasn’t about Tarasov. Thank God there was one crime I wasn’t guilty of. Then the full meaning of her words hit me. I glared.

“Wait. You guys get robbed, and I’m the one you suspect? I thought I was off your list of evil creatures?”

“No dhampir is off my list of evil creatures,” she said. That half smile of hers had returned, but I couldn’t tell if she was joking or not. It faded quickly, showing what a big deal this was for her. “And believe me, if anyone could break into our records, you could. It’s not easy. Practically impossible.”

“Um, thank you?” I wasn’t sure if I should feel flattered or not.

“Of course,” she continued scornfully, “they only stole paper records, which was stupid. Everything’s backed up digitally nowadays, so I’m not sure why they’d go digging through dinosaur filing cabinets.”

I could give her a lot of reasons why someone would do that, but finding out why I was her number-one suspect was more important. “That is stupid. So why do you think I’d do it?”

“Because of what was stolen. It was information about a Moroi named Eric Dragomir.”

“I—what?”

“That’s your friend, right? His daughter, I mean.”

“Yeah . . .” I was almost speechless. Almost. “You have files on Moroi?”

“We have files on everything,” she said proudly. “But when I tried to think who could commit a crime like this *and* would be interested in a Dragomir . . . well, your name popped into my head.”

“I didn’t do it. I do a lot of things, but not that. I didn’t even know you had those kinds of records.”

Sydney regarded me suspiciously.

“It’s the truth!”

“Like I said before,” she told me, “I won’t turn you in. Seriously. I just want to know so that I can get people to stop wasting time on certain leads.” Her smugness sobered. “And, well, if you did do it . . . I need to keep the attention off you. I promised Abe.”

“Whatever it takes for you to believe me, I didn’t do it! But now *I* want to know who did. What did they steal? Everything on him?”

She bit her lip. Owing Abe a favor might mean she’d go behind her own people’s backs, but she apparently had limits on how much she’d betray.

“Come on! If you’ve got digital backup, you have to know what was taken. This is Lissa we’re talking about.” An idea came to me. “Could you send me copies?”

“No,” she said swiftly. “Absolutely not.”

“Then please . . . just a hint of what they were about! Lissa’s my best friend. I can’t let anything happen to her.”

I fully braced myself for rejection. Sydney didn’t seem very personable. Did she have friends? Could she understand what I felt?

“Mostly bio stuff,” she said at last. “Some of his history and observations we’d made.”

"Observ—" I let it go, deciding I really didn't want to know more than I had to about Alchemists spying on us. "Anything else?"

"Financial records." She frowned. "Particularly about some large deposits he made to a bank account in Las Vegas. Deposits he went out of his way to cover up."

"Las Vegas? I was just there. . . ." Not that it was relevant.

"I know," she said. "I saw some Witching Hour security tapes of your adventure. The fact that you'd run off like that is part of why I suspected you. It seemed in character." She hesitated. "The guy with you . . . the tall Moroi with dark hair . . . is that your boyfriend?"

"Er, yeah."

It took a long time and great effort for her to concede the next statement. "He's cute."

"For an evil creature of the night?"

"Of course." She hesitated again. "Is it true you guys went there to elope?"

"What? No! These stories get to you guys too?" I shook my head, almost laughing at how ridiculous this all was, but knowing I needed to get back to the facts. "So, Eric had an account in Vegas he was moving money into?"

"It wasn't his. It was some woman's."

"What woman?"

"No one—well, no one we can track. She was just down as 'Jane Doe.'"

"Original," I muttered. "Why would he be doing that?"

"That we don't know. Or really care about. We just want to know who broke in and stole our stuff."

"The only thing I know about that is that it wasn't me." Seeing her scrutinizing look, I threw up my hands. "Come on! If I wanted to know about him, I'd just ask Lissa. Or steal our own records."

Several moments of silence passed.

"Okay. I believe you," she said.

"Really?"

"Do you want me to not believe you?"

"No, it was just easier than I thought convincing you."

She sighed.

"I want to know more about these records," I said fiercely. "I want to know who Jane Doe is. If you could get me other files—"

Sydney shook her head. "Nope. This is where I cut you off. You know too much already. Abe wanted me to keep you out of trouble, and I've done that. I've done my part."

"I don't think Abe's going to let you go so easily. Not if you made an open-ended deal."

She didn't acknowledge that, but the look in her brown eyes made me think she agreed. "Good night, Rose. Morning. Whatever."

"Wait, I—"

The screen went black.

"Damn," I growled, shutting the laptop more forcefully than I should have.

Every part of that conversation had been a shock, starting with Sydney and ending with someone stealing Alchemist records about Lissa's father. Why would anyone care about a dead man? And why steal the records at all? To

learn something? Or to try to hide information? If that last one was true, then Sydney was right that it had been a failed effort.

I replayed it all in my head as I got ready for bed, staring at my reflection while brushing my teeth. Why, why, why? Why do it? And who? I needed no more intrigue in my life, but anything involving Lissa had to be treated seriously. Unfortunately, it soon became clear I wouldn't figure out anything tonight, and I fell asleep with all those questions spinning around in my head.

I woke up the next morning feeling a little less overwhelmed—but still short on answers. I debated whether or not to tell Lissa about what I'd learned and finally decided I should. If someone was gathering information on her father, she had a right to know, and besides, this was hardly the same as rumors about his—

A thought startled me in the middle of scrubbing shampoo into my hair. I'd been too tired and surprised to string together the pieces last night. That guy at the Witching Hour had said Lissa's dad was there a lot. Now Sydney's records reported that he'd made large deposits into an account in Las Vegas. Coincidence? Maybe. But as time went on, I was starting not to believe in coincidences anymore.

Once presentable, I set out toward Lissa's side of Court—but didn't get very far. Adrian was waiting for me down in my building's foyer, slumped back into an armchair.

"It's early for you, isn't it?" I teased, coming to a stop in front of him.

I expected a smile in return, but Adrian didn't look particularly cheerful this morning. In fact, he appeared kind of bedraggled. His hair lacked its usual styling care, and his clothing—unusually dressy for this time of day—was wrinkled. The scent of clove cigarettes hung around him.

"Easy to be early when you don't get much sleep," he responded. "I was up a lot of the night waiting for someone."

"Waiting for—oh. God." The party. I'd totally forgotten the party his mother had invited me to. Abe and Sydney had distracted me. "Adrian, I'm so sorry."

He shrugged and didn't touch me when I sat down on the arm of his chair. "Whatever. I probably shouldn't be surprised anymore. I'm starting to realize I've been deluding myself."

"No, no. I was going to go, but then you won't believe what—"

"Save it. Please." His voice was weary, his eyes bloodshot. "It's not necessary. My mom told me she saw you over at Dimitri's questioning."

I frowned. "But that's not why I missed the party. There was this guy—"

"That's not the point, Rose. The point is that you managed to make time for that—and a visit to his cell, if what I heard is true. Yet, you couldn't bother showing up at something you said you'd do with me—or even send a message. That was all you had to do: say you couldn't go. I waited over an hour for you at my parents' house before giving up."

I started to say he could have tried to contact me, but honestly, why should he have? It wasn't his responsibility. I was the one who'd told Daniella I'd meet him there. It was my fault for not showing up.

"Adrian, I'm sorry." I clasped his hand, but he didn't squeeze back. "Really,

I meant to, but—"

"No," he interrupted again. "Ever since Dimitri came back . . . no, scratch that. Ever since you became obsessed with changing him, you've been torn over me. No matter what's happened between us, you've never really given yourself over to our relationship. I wanted to believe what you told me. I thought you were ready . . . but you weren't."

Protests rose to my lips, but once more, I stopped them. He was right. I'd said I'd give dating him a fair shot. I'd even sunk into the comfortable role of his girlfriend, yet the whole time . . . the whole time, part of me had been consumed with Dimitri. I'd known it too but had kept living split lives. A weird flashback to my time with Mason popped into my head. I'd led the same double life with him, and he'd died for it. I was a mess. I didn't know my own heart.

"I'm sorry," I said again. "I really do want us to have something. . . ." Even to me, the words sounded so lame. Adrian gave me a knowing smile.

"I don't believe that. Neither do you." He stood up and ran his hand over his hair, not that it did any good. "If you really want to be with me, then you've got to mean it this time."

I hated seeing him so grim. I especially hated being the reason. I followed him to the door. "Adrian, wait. Let's talk more."

"Not now, little dhampir. I need some sleep. I just can't handle playing this game right now."

I could have gone after him. I could have tackled him to the ground. But it wouldn't have been worth it . . . because I had no answers to give him. He'd been right about everything, and until I could make up my own confused mind, I had no right to force a talk. Besides, considering the state he was in, I doubted any further conversation would have been productive.

Yet as he started to step outside, I couldn't help my next words. "Before you go—and I understand why you have to—there's something I've got to ask you. Something that's not about us. It affects—it affects Lissa."

This slowly brought him to a halt. "Always a favor." With a world-weary sigh, he glanced at me over his shoulder. "Make it fast."

"Someone broke into the Alchemists' records and stole information about Lissa's dad. Some of it was ordinary life history stuff, but there were some documents about him making secret deposits into a bank account in Las Vegas. Some woman's bank account."

Adrian waited a few moments. "And?"

"And I'm trying to figure out why someone would do that. I don't want anyone snooping around her family. Do you have any idea what her dad would have been doing?"

"You heard the guy at the casino. Her dad was there a lot. Maybe he had gambling debts and was paying off a loan shark."

"Lissa's family's always had money," I pointed out. "He couldn't have gotten into that much debt. And why would anyone care enough to steal that info?"

Adrian threw up his hands. "I don't know. That's all I've got, at least this early in the morning. I don't have the brain power for intrigue. I can't really picture any of that being a threat to Lissa, though."

I nodded, disappointed. "Okay. Thanks."

He continued on his way, and I watched him go. Lissa lived near him, but I didn't want him to think I was following him. When he'd put enough distance between us, I stepped outdoors as well and started to head in the same direction. The faint sound of bells brought me to a halt. I hesitated, suddenly unsure where to go.

I wanted to talk to Lissa and tell her what Sydney had told me. Lissa was alone for a change; this was the perfect opportunity. And yet . . . the bells. It was Sunday morning. Mass was about to start at the Court's church. I had a hunch about something, and in spite of everything that had happened—including with Adrian—I had to see if I was right.

So I sprinted off toward the church, going in the opposite direction of Lissa's building. The doors were shut when I reached my destination, but a few other latecomers were trying to quietly slip in. I entered with them, pausing to get my bearings. Clouds of incense hung in the air, and my eyes took a moment to adjust from sunlight to candlelight. Since this church dwarfed St. Vladimir's chapel, it was packed with a lot more people than I was used to seeing at mass. Most of the seats were full.

But not all of them.

My hunch had been right. Dimitri sat in one of the back pews. A few guardians sat near him, of course, but that was it. Even in a crowded church, no one else had joined him on the bench. Reece had asked Dimitri if he'd step inside the church yesterday, and Dimitri had gone one step further, saying he'd even go to Sunday services.

The priest had already begun to speak, so I moved down Dimitri's pew as quietly as I could. Silence didn't matter, though, because I still attracted a fair amount of attention from nearby people who were astonished to see me sitting next to the Strigoi-turned-dhampir. Eyes stared and several hushed conversations broke out.

The guardians had left some space near Dimitri, and when I sat beside him, the look on his face showed he was both surprised and not surprised by this.

"Don't," he said in a hushed voice. "Don't start—not in here."

"Wouldn't dream of it, comrade," I murmured back. "Just came for the good of my soul, that's all."

He didn't need to say a word to convey to me that he doubted I was here for any holy reasons. I stayed quiet throughout the service, though. Even I respected some boundaries. After several minutes, the tension in Dimitri's body eased a little. He'd grown wary when I joined him but must have eventually decided I'd be on good behavior. His attention shifted off of me and focused on the singing and the praying, and I did my best to watch him without being obvious.

Dimitri used to go to the school's chapel because it brought him peace. He had always said that even though the killing he did destroyed evil in the world, he still felt the need to come think about his life and seek forgiveness for his sins. Seeing him now, I realized that was truer than ever.

His expression was exquisite. I was so used to seeing him hide emotions that it was a bit startling for him to suddenly have a host of them on his face. He was absorbed in the priest's words, his gorgeous face completely focused. And I realized he was taking everything the priest was saying about sin personally.

Dimitri was replaying all the awful things he'd done as a Strigoi. From the despair on his face, you'd think that Dimitri himself was responsible for all the sins of the world the priest spoke of.

For a moment, I thought I saw hope on Dimitri's face too, just a spark of it mixed in with his guilt and sorrow. No, I realized. Not hope. Hope implies that you think you have a chance at something. What I saw in Dimitri was longing. Wistfulness. Dimitri wished that by being here in this holy place and listening to the messages conveyed, he might find redemption for what he had done. Yet . . . at the same time, it was clear he didn't believe that was possible. He wanted it but could never have it as far as he was concerned.

Seeing that in him hurt me. I didn't know how to react to that kind of bleak attitude. He thought there was no hope for him. Me? I couldn't imagine a world without hope.

I also never would have imagined I'd quote back a church lesson, but when the rest of the crowd stood up to take communion, I found myself saying to Dimitri: "Don't you think that if God can supposedly forgive you, it's kind of egotistical for you not to forgive yourself?"

"How long have you been waiting to use that line on me?" he asked.

"Actually, it just came to me. Pretty good, huh? I bet you thought I wasn't paying attention."

"You weren't. You never do. You were watching me."

Interesting. To know that I was watching him, would Dimitri have had to have watched me watching him? It boggled the mind. "You didn't answer my question."

He kept his eyes on the communion line while composing his answer. "It's irrelevant. I don't have to forgive myself even if God does. And I'm not sure He would."

"That priest just said God would. He said God forgives *everything*. Are you calling the priest a liar? That's pretty sacrilegious."

Dimitri groaned. I never thought I'd take joy in tormenting him, but the frustrated look on his face wasn't because of his personal grief. It was because of me being impertinent. I'd seen this expression a hundred times on him, and the familiarity of it warmed me, as crazy as that sounds.

"Rose, you're the one being sacrilegious. You're twisting these people's faith for your own purposes. You've never believed in any of this. You still don't."

"I believe that the dead can come back to life," I said seriously. "The proof is sitting right next to me. If that's true, then I think you forgiving yourself isn't that much more of a leap."

His gaze hardened, and if he was praying for anything right then, it was that the communion process would speed up so that he could get out of here and away from me. We both knew he had to wait this church service out. If he ran out, it would make him look Strigoi.

"You don't know what you're talking about," he said.

"Don't I?" I hissed, leaning closer. I did it to drive home my point, but all it did (for me, at least) was give me a better view of the way the candlelight shone on his hair and how long and lean his body was. Someone had apparently decided he could be trusted to shave, and his face was smooth, showing its wonderful, perfect lines.

"I know exactly what I'm talking about," I continued, trying to ignore how his presence affected me. "I know that you've been through a lot. I know that you did terrible things—I *saw* them. But it's in the past. It was beyond your control. It's not like you're going to do it again."

A strange, haunted look crossed his face. "How do you know? Maybe the monster didn't leave. Maybe there's still something Strigoi lurking in me."

"Then you need to defeat it by moving on with your life! And not just through your chivalrous pledge to protect Lissa. You need to live again. You need to open yourself up to people who love you. No Strigoi would do that. That's how you'll save yourself."

"I can't have people loving me," he growled. "I'm incapable of loving anyone in return."

"Maybe you should try instead of just feeling sorry for yourself!"

"It's not that easy."

"Da—" I just barely stopped myself from swearing in a church. "Nothing we've ever done has been easy! Our life before—before the attack wasn't easy, and we made it through that! We can make it through this too. We can make it through anything together. It doesn't matter if you put your faith in this place. I don't care. What matters is that you put your faith in *us*."

"There is no us. I've already told you that."

"And you know I'm not a very good listener."

We were keeping our voices low, but I think our body language clearly indicated an argument. The other churchgoers were too distracted to notice, but Dimitri's guardians were regarding us carefully. Again, I reminded myself about what Lissa and Mikhail had both said. Getting Dimitri angry in public was not going to do him any favors. The problem was, I had yet to say anything that *didn't* make him angry.

"I wish you hadn't come here," he said at last. "It's really better for us to stay apart."

"That's funny because I could have sworn you once said we were meant to be together."

"I want you to stay away from me," he said, ignoring my comment. "I don't want you to keep trying to bring back feelings that are gone. *That's* the past. None of that's going to happen again. Not ever. It's better for us if we act like strangers. It's better for *you*."

The loving, compassionate feelings he had stirred within me heated up—to fury. "If you're going to tell me what I can or can't do," I growled in as low a tone as I could manage, "then at least have the courage to say it to my face!"

He spun around so quickly that he might have indeed still been Strigoi. His face was filled with . . . what? Not that earlier depression. Not rage either, though there was a bit of anger. There was more, though . . . a mingling of desperation, frustration, and maybe even fear. Underscoring all of it was pain, like he suffered from terrible, exquisite agony.

"I don't want you here," he said, eyes blazing. The words hurt, but something about it all thrilled me, just as his earlier agitation at my flippant comments had. This wasn't the cold and calculating Strigoi. This wasn't the defeated man in the cell. This was my old instructor, my lover, who attacked everything in life with intensity and passion. "How many times do I have to

tell you that? You need to stay away from me."

"But you aren't going to hurt me. I know that."

"I've already hurt you. Why can't you understand that? How many times do I have to say it?"

"You told me . . . you told me before you left that you loved me." My voice trembled. "How can you let that go?"

"Because it's too late! And it's easier than being reminded of what I did to you!" His control snapped, his voice echoing through the back of the church. The priest and those still taking communion didn't notice, but we'd definitely gotten the attention of those in the back half of the church. A few of the guardians stiffened, and again, I had to repeat the warning to myself. No matter how furious I was at Dimitri, no matter how betrayed I felt that he'd turned away from me . . . I could *not* risk others thinking he was dangerous. Dimitri hardly looked like he was going to snap someone's neck, but he was clearly upset, and one might confuse his frustration and pain for something more sinister.

I turned from him, trying to calm my churning emotions. When I looked back, our eyes locked, power and electricity burning between us. Dimitri could ignore it all he wanted, but that connection—that deep calling of our souls—was still in there. I wanted to touch him, not just with this brushing of my leg but with everything. I wanted to wrap him in my arms and hold him against me, reassuring him that we could do anything together. Without even realizing it, I reached toward him, needing that touch. He sprang up like I was a snake, and all of his guardians shot forward, braced for what he might do.

But he did nothing. Nothing except stare at me with a look that made my blood run cold. Like I was something strange and bad. "Rose. Please stop. Please stay away." He was working hard to stay calm.

I shot up, now as angry and frustrated as him. I had a feeling if I stayed, we'd both snap. In an undertone, I murmured, "This isn't over. I won't give up on you."

"I've given up on you," he said back, voice also soft. "Love fades. Mine has."

I stared at him in disbelief. All this time, he'd never phrased it like that. His protests had always been about some greater good, about the remorse he felt over being a monster or how it had scarred him from love. *I've given up on you. Love fades. Mine has.*

I backed up, the sting of those words hitting me as hard as if he'd slapped me. Something shifted in his features, like maybe he knew how much he'd hurt me. I didn't stick around to see. Instead, I pushed my way out of the aisle and ran out the doors in the back, afraid that if I stayed any longer, everyone in the church would see me cry.

TWENTY-FIVE

I DIDN'T WANT TO SEE anyone after that. I walked back to my room as quickly as I could, hardly noticing the obstacles and people in my path. Over and over, Dimitri's words played in my head: *Love fades*. *Mine has.* Somehow, that was the worst thing he could have said. Don't get me wrong: The rest wasn't easy either. Having him tell me he was going to avoid me and ignore our past relationship made me feel awful too. Yet, within that, no matter how much it hurt, was the tiny hope that there was still some spark of love between us. That he still loved me.

But . . . love fades.

That was something else altogether. It meant that what we had would die, going pale until it crumbled and drifted away like dried up leaves in the wind. The thought of it caused a pain in my chest and stomach, and I curled up on my bed, wrapping my arms around myself as though that might lessen the hurt. I couldn't accept what he had said. I couldn't accept that somehow, after his ordeal, his love for me had gone away.

I wanted to stay in my room for the rest of the day, curled up in the darkness of my covers. I forgot about Sydney's conversation and my earlier concerns about Lissa's dad. I even let go of Lissa herself. She had a few errands today, but every so often, a message would flit to me through the bond: *Come join me?*

When I didn't contact her, she began to grow worried. I was suddenly afraid that she—or someone else—might come seeking me in my room. So I decided to leave. I had no real destination; I just had to keep moving. I walked around the Court, scouting places I'd never seen before. It was filled with more statues and fountains than I'd realized. Their beauty was lost on me, though, and when I returned to my room hours later, I was exhausted from all the walking. Oh well. At least I'd dodged having to talk to anyone.

Or had I? It was late, past my usual bedtime, when a knock came at my door. I was hesitant to answer. Who would be coming by so late? Did I want the distraction or did I want to keep my solitude? I had no idea who it could be, save that it wasn't Lissa. God. For all I knew, it was Hans, demanding to know why I hadn't been showing up for my work detail. After much thinking (and more persistent knocking), I decided to open it.

It was Adrian.

"Little dhampir," he said with a small, weary smile. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

Not a ghost, exactly. Believe me, I knew ghosts when I saw them. "I just . . . I just didn't really expect to see you after this morning. . . ."

He entered and sat down on my bed, and I was glad to see he'd cleaned up since our earlier talk. He wore fresh clothes, and his hair was back to its normal perfection. I still caught the lingering scent of cloves, but after what I'd

put him through, he was entitled to his vices.

"Yeah, well, I didn't expect to come by either," he admitted. "But you . . . well . . . you got me thinking about something."

I sat down beside him, keeping a healthy distance. "Us?"

"No. Lissa."

"Oh." I'd accused Dimitri of being egotistic, but here I was, naturally assuming love for me was all that could have driven Adrian over.

His green eyes turned speculative. "I kept thinking about what you'd said, about her dad. And you were right—right about the gambling thing. He'd have the money to pay off any debt. He wouldn't have had to keep it a secret. So I went and asked my mom."

"What?" I exclaimed. "No one's supposed to know that—"

"Yeah, yeah, I figured your information had been top secret. Don't worry. I told her that when we were in Vegas, we heard some people talking about it—about Lissa's dad making secret deposits."

"What'd she say?"

"The same thing I did. Well, actually, she snapped at me first. She said Eric Dragomir was a good man and that I shouldn't spread rumors about the dead. She suggested that maybe he had a gambling problem, but if so, people shouldn't focus on that, when he did so many great things. After the Death Watch, I think she's afraid of me causing more public scenes."

"She's right. About Eric," I said. Maybe someone had stolen those records as some part of a slander campaign. Admittedly, spreading rumors about the dead was pointless, but maybe someone wanted to blacken the Dragomir reputation and get rid of any chance of the voting law being changed for Lissa? I was about to say as much to Adrian when he interrupted with something even more shocking.

"And then my dad overheard us, and he was like, 'He was probably funding some mistress. You're right—he was a nice guy. But he liked to flirt. And he liked the ladies.'" Adrian rolled his eyes. "That's a direct quote: 'He liked the ladies.' My dad is such an ass. He sounds twice his age."

I gripped Adrian's arm without realizing it. "What did he say after that?"

Adrian shrugged but left my hand where it was. "Nothing. My mom got mad and said the same thing to him that she said to me, that it was cruel to spread stories no one could prove."

"Do you think it's true? Do you think Lissa's dad had a mistress? Was that what he was paying out for?"

"Don't know, little dhampir. Honestly? My dad's the type who would jump on any rumor he could. Or make one up. I mean, we know Lissa's dad liked to party. It's easy to jump to conclusions from there. Probably he had some dirty secret. Hell, we all do. Maybe whoever stole those files just wanted to exploit that."

I told him my theory about it being used against Lissa. "Or," I said, reconsidering, "maybe someone who supports her took it. So that it wouldn't get out."

Adrian nodded. "Either way, I don't think Lissa's in mortal danger."

He started to rise, and I pulled him back. "Adrian, wait . . . I . . ." I swallowed. "I wanted to apologize. The way I've been treating you, what I've

been doing . . . it wasn't fair to you. I'm sorry."

He looked away from me, eyes focused on the ground. "You can't help the way you feel."

"The thing is . . . I don't know how I feel. And that sounds stupid, but it's the truth. I care about Dimitri. I was stupid to think I'd be unaffected by him being back. But I realize now . . ." *Love fades. Mine has.* "I realize now that it's over with him. I'm not saying that's easy to get past. It'll take a while, and I'd be lying to both of us if I said it wouldn't."

"That makes sense," Adrian said.

"It does?"

He glanced at me, a flicker of amusement in his eyes. "Yes, little dhampir. Sometimes you make sense. Go on."

"I . . . well, like I said . . . I've got to heal from him. But I do care about you. . . . I think I even love you a little." That got a small smile. "I want to try again. I really do. I like having you in my life, but I may have jumped into things too soon before. You don't have any reason to want me after the way I've dragged you around, but if you want to get together again, then I want to."

He studied me for a long time, and my breath caught. I'd meant what I said: He had every right to end things with us . . . and yet, the thought that he might terrified me.

At last, he pulled me against him and lay back against the bed. "Rose, I have all sorts of reasons to want you. I haven't been able to stay away from you since I saw you at the ski lodge."

I shifted closer to Adrian on the bed and pressed my head against his chest. "We can make this work. I know we can. If I screw up again, you can leave."

"If only it were that easy," he laughed. "You forget: I have an addictive personality. I'm addicted to you. Somehow I think you could do all sorts of bad things to me, and I'd still come back to you. Just keep things honest, okay? Tell me what you're feeling. If you're feeling something for Dimitri that's confusing you, tell me. We'll work it out."

I wanted to tell him that—regardless of my feelings—he had nothing to worry about with Dimitri because Dimitri had rejected me a number of times now. I could chase after Dimitri all I wanted, and it wouldn't do any good. *Love fades*. Those words still stung, and I couldn't bear to give voice to that pain. But as Adrian held me and I thought about how understanding he was about all of this, some wounded part of me acknowledged that the opposite was true as well: *Love grows*. I would try with him. I really would.

I sighed. "You're not supposed to be this wise. You're supposed to be shallow and unreasonable and . . . and . . ."

He pressed a kiss to my forehead. "And?"

"Mmm . . . ridiculous."

"Ridiculous I can manage. And the others . . . but only on special occasions."

We were wrapped close together now, and I tilted my head to study him, the high cheekbones and artfully messy hair that made him so gorgeous. I remembered his mother's words, that regardless of what we wanted, he and I would eventually have to part ways. Maybe this was how my life was going to

be. I'd always lose the men I loved.

I pulled him hard against me, kissing his mouth with a force that caught even him by surprise. If I had learned anything about life and love, it was that they were tenuous things that could end at any moment. Caution was essential—but not at the cost of wasting your life. I decided I wasn't going to waste it now.

My hands were already tugging at Adrian's shirt before that thought was fully formed. He didn't question it or hesitate in taking my clothes off in return. He might have moments of profoundness and understanding, but he was still . . . well, Adrian. Adrian lived his life in the now, doing the things he wanted without much second-guessing. And he had wanted me for a very long time.

He was also very good at this sort of thing, which was why my clothes came off faster than his. His lips were hot and eager against my throat, but he was careful to never once let his fangs brush my skin. I was a little less gentle, surprising myself when I dug my nails into the bare skin of his back. His lips moved lower, tracing the line of my collarbone while he deftly took off my bra one-handed.

I was a little astonished at my body's reaction as we both fought to get the other's jeans off first. I'd convinced myself that I'd never want sex again after Dimitri, but right now? Oh, I wanted it. Maybe it was some psychological reaction to Dimitri's rejection. Maybe it was an impulse to live for the moment. Maybe it was love for Adrian. Or maybe it was just lust.

Whatever it was, it made me powerless beneath his hands and mouth, which seemed intent on exploring every part of me. The only time he paused was when all my clothes were finally off and I lay there naked with him. He was almost naked too, but I hadn't quite gotten to his boxers yet. (They were silk because, honestly, what else would Adrian wear?). He cupped my face in his hands, his eyes filled with intensity and desire—and a bit of wonder.

"What are you, Rose Hathaway? Are you real? You're a dream within a dream. I'm afraid touching you will make me wake up. You'll disappear." I recognized a little of the poetic trance he sometimes fell into, the spells that made me wonder if he was catching a little of the spirit-induced madness.

"Touch me and find out," I said, drawing him to me.

He didn't hesitate again. The last of his clothes came off, and my whole body heated at the feel of his skin and the way his hands slid over me. My physical needs were rapidly trampling over any logic and reason. There was no thought, just us, and the fierce urgency bringing us together. I was all burning need and desire and sensation and—

"Oh, shit."

It came out as kind of a mumble since we'd been kissing, our lips eagerly seeking out the other's. With guardian reflexes, I barely managed to shift away, just as our hips started to come together. Losing the feel of him was shocking to me, more so for him. He was stunned, simply staring in astonishment as I wriggled further from him and finally managed a sitting position on the bed.

"What . . . what's wrong? Did you change your mind?"

"We need protection first," I said. "Do you have any condoms?"

He processed this for a few seconds and then sighed. “Rose, only you would pick this instant to remember that.”

That was a fair point. My timing kind of sucked. Still, it was better than remembering it *afterward.* In spite of my body’s rampant desire—and it was still there, believe me—I suddenly had a startling, vivid image of Dimitri’s sister Karolina. I’d met her in Siberia, and she’d had a baby that was about six months old. The baby was adorable, as babies often are, but by God, she had been so much work. Karolina had a waitressing job, and as soon as she was home from that, her attention went to the baby. When she was at work, Dimitri’s mother took care of the baby. And the baby always needed something: food, changing, rescue from choking on a small object. His sister Sonya had been on the verge of having a baby too, and with the way I’d left things with his youngest sister, Viktoria, I wouldn’t be surprised to find she was pregnant before long. Huge life changes made from small, careless actions.

So I was pretty confident I didn’t want a baby in my life right now, not this young. With Dimitri, it hadn’t been a concern, thanks to dhampir infertility. With Adrian? It was an issue, as was the fact that while disease was rare among both our races, I wasn’t the first girl Adrian had been with. Or the second. Or the third . . .

“So do you have any?” I asked impatiently. Just because I was in responsible mode, it didn’t mean I wanted sex any less.

“Yes,” said Adrian, sitting up as well. “Back in my bedroom.”

We stared at each other. His bedroom was far away, over in the Moroi section of Court.

He slid nearer, putting his arm around me and nibbling my earlobe. “The odds of anything bad happening are pretty low.”

I closed my eyes and tipped my head back against him. He wrapped his hands around my hips and stroked my skin. “What are you, a doctor?” I asked.

He laughed softly, his mouth kissing the spot just behind my ear. “No. I’m just someone willing to take a risk. You can’t tell me you don’t want this.”

I opened my eyes and pulled away so that I could look at him directly. He was right. I did want this. Very, very badly. And the part of me—which was pretty much all of me—that burned with lust was attempting to win me over. The odds probably were low, right? Weren’t there people who tried forever to get pregnant and couldn’t? My desire had an okay argument, so it was kind of a surprise when my logic won.

“*I* can’t take the risk,” I said.

Now Adrian studied me, and at last, he nodded. “Okay. Another time then. Tonight we’ll be . . . responsible.”

“That’s all you’re going to say?”

He frowned. “What else would I say? You said no.”

“But you . . . you could have compelled me.”

Now he was really astonished. “Do you *want* me to compel you?”

“No. Of course not. It just occurred to me that . . . well, that you could have.”

Adrian cupped my face in his hands. “Rose, I cheat at cards and buy liquor for minors. But I would never, ever force you into something you don’t want.

Certainly not this—”

His words were cut off because I’d pressed myself against him and started kissing him again. Surprise must have kept him from doing anything right away, but soon, he pushed me away with what seemed like great reluctance.

“Little dhampir,” he said dryly, “if you want to be responsible, this is not a good way to do it.”

“We don’t have to let this go. And we *can* be responsible.”

“All of those stories are—”

He came screeching to a halt when I tossed my hair out of the way and offered my neck to him. I managed to turn slightly so that I could meet his eyes, but I said nothing. I didn’t have to. The invitation was obvious.

“Rose . . .” he said uncertainly—though I could see the longing spring up in his face.

Drinking blood wasn’t the same as sex, but it was a yearning all vampires had, and doing it while aroused—so I’d heard—was a mind-blowing experience. It was also taboo and hardly ever done, so people claimed. It was where the definition of blood whore had originated: dhampirs who gave their blood during sex. The idea of dhampirs yielding blood at all was considered disgraceful, but I’d done it before: with Lissa when she needed food and with Dimitri when he’d been Strigoi. And it had been glorious.

He tried again, his voice steadier this time. “Rose, do you know what you’re asking?”

“Yes,” I said firmly. I gently ran a finger along his lips and then slipped in to touch his fangs. I threw his own words back at him. “You can’t tell me you don’t want this.”

He did want it. In a heartbeat, his mouth was at my neck and his fangs were piercing my skin. I cried out at the sudden pain, a sound that softened to a moan as the endorphins that came with every vampire bite flooded into me. An exquisite bliss consumed me. He pulled me hard against him as he drank, almost onto his lap, pressing my back against his chest. I was distantly aware of his hands all over me again, of his lips upon my throat. Mostly, all I knew was that I was drowning in pure, ecstatic sweetness. The perfect high.

When he pulled away, it was like losing part of myself. Like being incomplete. Confused, needing him back, I reached for him. He gently pushed my hand away, smiling as he licked his lips.

“Careful, little dhampir. I went longer than I should have. You could probably grow wings and fly off right now.”

It actually didn’t sound like a bad idea. In a few more moments, though, the intense, crazy part of the high faded, and I settled back to myself. I still felt wonderful and dizzy; the endorphins had fed my body’s desire. My reasoning slowly came back to me, allowing (kind of) coherent thought to penetrate that happy haze. When Adrian was convinced I was sober enough, he relaxed and lay down on the bed. I joined him a moment later, curling up against his side. He seemed as content as I was.

“That,” he mused, “was the best not-sex ever.”

My only response was a sleepy smile. It was late, and the more I crashed down from the endorphin rush, the drowsier I felt. Some tiny part of me said that even though I’d wanted this and cared about Adrian, the whole act had

been wrong. I hadn't done it for the right reasons, instead letting myself get carried away by my own grief and confusion.

The rest of me decided that wasn't true, and the nagging voice soon faded into exhaustion. I fell asleep against Adrian, getting the best night of sleep I'd had in a long time.

I wasn't entirely surprised that I was able to get out of bed, shower, get dressed, and even blow-dry my hair without Adrian waking up. My friends and I had spent many a morning trying to drag him out of bed in the past. Hungover or sober, he was a heavy sleeper.

I spent more time on my hair than I had in a while. The telltale mark of a vampire bite was fresh on my neck. So I wore my hair down, careful to style it with a part so that the long waves hung heavy on the bite side. Satisfied the bruise would stay camouflaged, I pondered what to do next. In an hour or so, the Council was going to listen to arguments from factions with varying ideas on the new age decree, Moroi fighting, and the Dragomir vote. Provided they let me in the hall, I had no intention of missing the debates on the hottest issues in our world right now.

I didn't want to wake up Adrian, though. He was tangled up in my sheets and slept peacefully. If I woke him up, I'd feel obligated to stick around while he got ready. Through the bond, I felt Lissa sitting alone at a café table. I wanted to see her and have breakfast, so I decided Adrian could fend for himself. I left him a note about where I was, told him the door would lock on his way out, and drew lots of *x*'s and *o*'s.

When I was halfway to the café, though, I sensed something that ruined my breakfast plan. Christian had sat down with Lissa.

"Well, well," I muttered. With everything else going on, I hadn't paid much attention to Lissa's personal life. After what had happened at the warehouse, I wasn't entirely surprised to see them together, though her feelings told me there had been no romantic reconciliation . . . yet. This was an uneasy attempt at friendship, a chance to get over their constant jealousy and distrust.

Far be it from me to intrude on love at work. I knew another place near the guardians' buildings that also had coffee and doughnuts. It would do, provided no one there remembered that I was technically still on probation and had made a scene in a royal hall.

The odds on that probably weren't good.

Still, I decided to give it a try and headed over, eyeing the overcast sky uneasily. Rain wouldn't help my mood any. When I got to the café, I discovered I didn't have to worry about anyone paying attention to me. There was a bigger draw: Dimitri.

He was out with his personal guard, and even though I was glad he had some freedom, the attitude that he needed close watching still angered me. At least there was no giant crowd today. People who came in for breakfast couldn't help but stare, but few lingered. He had five guardians with him this time, which was a significant reduction. That was a good sign. He sat alone at a table, coffee and a half-eaten glazed doughnut in front of him. He was reading a paperback novel that I would have bet my life was a Western.

No one sat with him. His escort simply maintained a ring of protection, a couple near the walls, one at the entrance, and two at nearby tables. The security seemed pointless. Dimitri was completely engrossed in his book, oblivious to the guards and occasional spectators—or he was simply making a good show of not caring. He seemed very harmless, but Adrian's words came back to me. Was there any Strigoi left in him? Some dark part? Dimitri himself claimed he still carried the piece that prevented him from ever truly loving anyone.

He and I had always had this uncanny awareness of each other. In a crowded room, I could always find him. And in spite of his preoccupation with the book, he looked up when I walked toward the café's counter. Our eyes met for a millisecond. There was no expression on his face . . . and yet, I had the feeling he was waiting for something.

Me, I realized with a start. Despite everything, despite our fight in the church . . . he still thought I would pursue and make some pledge of my love. Why? Did he just expect me to be that unreasonable? Or was it possible . . . was it possible he *wanted* me to approach him?

Well, whatever the reason, I decided I wouldn't give it to him. He'd hurt me too many times already. He'd told me to stay away, and if that was all part of some elaborate game to toy with my feelings, I wasn't going to play. I gave him a haughty look and turned away sharply as I walked up to the counter. I ordered chai and a chocolate éclair. After a moment's consideration, I ordered a second éclair. I had a feeling it was going to be one of those days.

My plan had been to eat outside, but as I glanced toward the tinted windows, I could just barely make out the pattern of raindrops hitting the panes. Damn. I briefly considered fighting the weather and going somewhere else with my food, but I decided I wasn't going to let Dimitri scare me off. Spying a table far from him, I headed toward it, going out of my way not to look at or acknowledge him.

"Hey Rose. Are you going to the Council today?"

I came to a halt. One of Dimitri's guardians had spoken, giving me a friendly smile as he did. I couldn't recall the guy's name, but he'd seemed nice whenever we passed each other. I didn't want to be rude, and so, reluctantly, I answered back—even though it meant staying near Dimitri.

"Yup," I said, making sure my attention was only on the guardian. "Just grabbing a bite before I do."

"Are they going to let you in?" asked another of the guardians. He too was smiling. For a moment, I thought they were mocking my last outburst. But no . . . that wasn't it. Their faces showed approval.

"That's an excellent question," I admitted. I took a bite of my éclair. "But I figure I should give it a try. I'll also try to be on good behavior."

The first guardian chuckled. "I certainly hope not. That group deserves all the grief you can give them over that stupid age law." The other guardians nodded.

"What age law?" asked Dimitri.

Reluctantly, I looked over at him. As always, he swept my breath away. *Stop it, Rose,* I scolded myself. *You're mad at him, remember? And now you've chosen Adrian.*

“The decree where royals think sending sixteen-year-old dhampirs out to fight Strigoi is the same as sending eighteen-year-olds,” I said. I took another bite.

Dimitri’s head shot up so quickly, I nearly choked on my food. “Which sixteen-year-olds are fighting Strigoi?” His guardians tensed but did nothing else.

It took me a moment to get the bite of éclair down. When I could finally speak, I was almost afraid to. “That’s the decree. Dhampirs graduate when they’re sixteen now.”

“When did this happen?” he demanded.

“Just the other day. No one told you?” I glanced over at the other guardians. One of them shrugged. I had the impression that they might believe Dimitri was truly a dhampir but that they weren’t ready to get chatty with him. His only other social contact would have been Lissa and his interrogators.

“No.” Dimitri’s brow furrowed as he pondered the news.

I ate my éclair in silence, hoping it would push him to talk more. It did.

“That’s insane,” he said. “Morality aside, they aren’t ready that young. It’s suicide.”

“I know. Tasha gave a really good argument against it. I did too.”

Dimitri gave me a suspicious look at that last part, particularly when a couple of his guardians smiled.

“Was it a close vote?” he asked. He spoke to me interrogation style, in the serious and focused way that had so defined him as a guardian. It was a lot better than depression, I decided. It was also better than him telling me to go away.

“Very close. If Lissa could have voted, it wouldn’t have passed.”

“Ah,” he said, playing with the edges of his coffee cup. “The quorum.”

“You know about that?” I asked in surprise.

“It’s an old Moroi law.”

“So I hear.”

“What’s the opposition trying to do? Sway the Council back or get Lissa the Dragomir vote?”

“Both. And other things.”

He shook his head, tucking some hair behind his ear. “They can’t do that. They need to pick one cause and throw their weight behind it. Lissa’s the smartest choice. The Council needs the Dragomirs back, and I’ve seen the way people look at her when they put me on display.” Only the slightest edge of bitterness laced his words, indicating how he felt about that. Then it was back to business. “It wouldn’t be hard to get support for that—if they don’t divide their efforts.”

I started in on my second éclair, forgetting about my earlier resolution to ignore him. I didn’t want to distract him from the topic. It was the first thing that had brought the old fire back to his eyes, the only thing he seemed truly interested in—well, aside from pledging lifelong devotion to Lissa and telling me to stay out of his life. I liked this Dimitri.

It was the same Dimitri from long ago, the fierce one who was willing to risk his life for what was right. I almost wished he’d go back to being annoying, distant Dimitri, the one who told me to stay away. Seeing him now

brought back too many memories—not to mention the attraction I thought I'd smashed. Now, with that passion all over him, he seemed sexier than ever. He'd worn that same intensity when we'd fought together. Even when we'd had sex. This was the way Dimitri was supposed to be: powerful and in charge. I was glad and yet . . . seeing him the way I loved only made my heart feel that much worse. He was lost to me.

If Dimitri guessed my feelings, he didn't show it. He looked squarely at me, and, like always, the power of that gaze wrapped around me. "The next time you see Tasha, will you send her to me? We need to talk about this."

"So, Tasha can be your friend, but not me?" The sharp words were out before I could stop them. I flushed, embarrassed that I'd lapsed in front of the other guardians. Dimitri apparently didn't want an audience either. He looked up at the one who had initially addressed me.

"Is there any way we could have some privacy?"

His escort exchanged looks, and then, almost as one being, they stepped back. It wasn't a considerable distance, and they still maintained a ring around Dimitri. Nonetheless, it was enough that all of our conversation wouldn't be overheard. Dimitri turned back to me. I sat down.

"You and Tasha have completely different situations. She can safely be in my life. You can't."

"And yet," I said with an angry toss of my hair, "it's apparently okay for me to be in your life when it's convenient—say, like, running errands or passing messages."

"It doesn't really seem like you need me in your life," he noted dryly, inclining his head slightly toward my right shoulder.

It took me a moment to grasp what had happened. In tossing my hair, I'd exposed my neck—and the bite. I tried not to blush again, knowing I had nothing to feel embarrassed about. I pushed the hair back.

"That's none of your business," I hissed, hoping the other guardians hadn't seen.

"Exactly." He sounded triumphant. "Because you need to live your own life, far away from me."

"Oh, for God's sake," I exclaimed. "Will you stop with the—"

My eyes lifted from his face because an army suddenly descended upon us.

Okay, it wasn't exactly an army, but it might as well have been. One minute it was just Dimitri, me, and his security, and then suddenly—the room was swarming with guardians. And not just any guardians. They wore the black-and-white outfits guardians often did for formal occasions, but a small red button on their collars marked them as guardians specifically attached to the queen's guard. There had to be at least twenty of them.

They were lethal and deadly, the best of the best. Throughout history, assassins who had attacked monarchs had found themselves quickly taken down by the royal guard. They were walking death—and they were all gathering around us. Dimitri and I both shot up, unsure what was happening but certain the threat here was directed at us. His table and its chairs were between us, but we still immediately fell into the standard fighting stance when surrounded by enemies: Go back-to-back.

Dimitri's security wore ordinary clothing and seemed a bit astonished to see

their brethren, but with guardian efficiency, the escort promptly joined the advancing queen's guard. There were no more smiles or jokes. I wanted to throw myself in front of Dimitri, but in this situation, it was kind of difficult.

"You need to come with us right now," one of the queen's guards said. "If you resist, we'll take you by force."

"Leave him alone!" I yelled, looking from face to face. That angry darkness exploded within me. How could they still not believe? Why were they still coming after him? "He hasn't done anything! Why can't you guys accept that he's really a dhampir now?"

The man who'd spoken arched an eyebrow. "I wasn't talking to *him*."

"You're . . . you're here for me?" I asked. I tried to think of any new spectacles I might have caused recently. I considered the crazy idea that the queen had found out I'd spent the night with Adrian and was pissed off about it. That was hardly enough to send the palace guard for me, though . . . or was it? Had I really gone too far with my antics?

"What for?" demanded Dimitri. That tall, wonderful body of his—the one that could be so sensual sometimes—was filled with tension and menace now.

The man kept his gaze on me, ignoring Dimitri. "Don't make me repeat myself: Come with us quietly, or we will make you." The glimmer of handcuffs showed in his hands.

My eyes went wide. "That's crazy! I'm not going anywhere until you tell me how the hell this—"

That was the point at which they apparently decided I wasn't coming quietly. Two of the royal guardians lunged for me, and even though we technically worked for the same side, my instincts kicked in. I didn't understand anything here except that I would *not* be dragged away like some kind of master criminal. I shoved the chair I'd been sitting in earlier at one of the guardians and aimed a punch at the other. It was a sloppy throw, made worse because he was taller than me. That height difference allowed me to dodge his next grab, and when I kicked hard at his legs, a small grunt told me I'd hit home.

I heard a few scattered screams. The people working at the café ducked behind their counter like they expected automatic weapons to come out. The other patrons who'd been eating breakfast hurriedly sprang from their tables, heedlessly knocking over food and dishes. They ran for the exits—exits that were blocked by still more guardians. This brought more screams, even though the exits were being cut off because of me.

Meanwhile, other guardians were joining the fray. Although I got a couple of good punches in, I knew the numbers were too overwhelming. One guardian caught hold of my arm and began trying to put the cuffs on me. He stopped when another set of hands grabbed me from the other side and jerked me away.

Dimitri.

"Don't touch her," he growled.

There was a note in his voice that would have scared me if it had been directed toward me. He shoved me behind him, putting his body protectively in front of mine with my back to the table. Guardians came at us from all directions, and Dimitri began dispatching them with the same deadly grace

that had once made people call him a god. He didn't kill any of the ones he fought, but he made sure they were out of action. If anyone thought his ordeals as a Strigoi or being locked up had diminished his fighting ability, they were terribly mistaken. Dimitri was a force of nature, managing to take on both impossible odds and stop me each time I tried to join the fight. The queen's guards might have been the best of the best, but Dimitri . . . well, my former lover and instructor was in a category all his own. His fighting skills were beyond anyone else's, and he was using them all in defense of me.

"Stay back," he ordered me. "They aren't laying a hand on you."

At first, I was overwhelmed by his protectiveness—even though I hated not being part of a fight. Watching him fight again was also entrancing. He made it look beautiful and lethal at the same time. He was a one-man army, the kind of warrior that protected his loved ones and brought terror to his enemies—

And that's when a horrible revelation hit me.

"Stop!" I suddenly yelled. "I'll come! I'll come with you!"

No one heard me at first. They were too involved with the fight. Guardians kept trying to sneak behind Dimitri, but he seemed to sense them and would shove chairs or anything else he could get a hold of at them—while still managing to kick and punch those coming at us head-on. Who knew? Maybe he really could have taken on an army by himself.

But I couldn't let him.

I shook Dimitri's arm. "Stop," I repeated. "Don't fight anymore."

"Rose—"

"*Stop!*"

I was pretty sure I'd never screamed any word so loudly in my life. It rang through the room. For all I knew, it rang through the entire Court.

It didn't exactly make everyone come to a halt, but many of the guardians slowed down. A few of the cowering café workers peered over the counter at us. Dimitri was still in motion, still ready to take everyone on, and I had to practically throw myself at him to get him to notice me.

"Stop." This time, my voice was a whisper. An uneasy silence had fallen over everyone. "Don't fight them anymore. I'm going to go with them."

"No. I won't let them take you."

"You have to," I begged.

He was breathing hard, every part of him braced and ready to attack. We locked gazes, and a thousand messages seemed to flow between us as the old electricity crackled in the air. I just hoped he got the right message.

One of the guardians tentatively stepped forward—having to go around the unconscious body of his colleague—and Dimitri's tension snapped. He started to block the guardian and defend me again, but I instead put myself between them, clasping Dimitri's hand and still looking into his eyes. His skin was warm and felt so, so right touching mine.

"Please. No more."

I saw then that he finally understood what I was trying to say. People were still afraid of him. No one knew what he was. Lissa had said him behaving calmly and normally would soothe fears. But this? Him taking on an army of guardians? That was not going to get him points for good behavior. For all I knew, it was already too late after this, but I had to attempt damage control. I

couldn't let them lock him up again—not because of me.

As he looked at me, he seemed to send a message of his own: that he would still fight for me, that he would fight until he collapsed to keep them from taking me.

I shook my head and gave his hand a parting squeeze. His fingers were exactly as I remembered, long and graceful, with calluses built up from years of training. I let go and turned to face the guy who had originally spoken. I assumed he was some sort of leader.

I held out my hands and slowly stepped forward. "I'll go quietly. But, please . . . don't lock him back up. He just thought . . . he just thought I was in trouble."

The thing was, as the handcuffs were clamped onto my wrists, *I* was starting to think I was in trouble too. As the guardians helped each other up, their leader took a deep breath and made the proclamation he'd been trying to make since entering. I swallowed, waiting to hear Victor's name.

"Rose Hathaway, you are under arrest for high treason."

Not quite what I'd expected. Hoping my submission had earned me points, I asked, "What kind of high treason?"

"The murder of Her Royal Majesty, Queen Tatiana."

TWENTY-SIX

MAYBE IT WAS SOMEONE'S SICK sense of humor, but I ended up in Dimitri's now-vacated cell.

I had come quietly after that guardian laid the charges before me. In fact, I'd become comatose because too much of what he'd said was impossible to process. I couldn't even really get to the part about me. I couldn't feel outrage or indignation over the accusation because I was still stuck on the part about Tatiana being dead.

Not just dead. Murdered.

Murdered?

How had that happened? How had that happened around here? This Court was one of the most secure places in the world, and Tatiana in particular was always guarded—by the same group that had descended on Dimitri and me so quickly. Unless she'd left Court—and I was pretty sure she hadn't—no Strigoi could have killed her. With the constant threats we faced, murder among dhampirs and Moroi was almost unheard of. Sure, it happened. It was inevitable in any society, but with the way ours was hunted, we rarely had time to turn on each other (shouting in Council meetings aside). That was part of why Victor had been so condemned. His crimes were about as bad as things got.

Until now.

Once I got past the impossible idea of Tatiana being dead, I was able to ask the real question: Why me? Why were they accusing me? I was no lawyer, but I was pretty sure calling someone a sanctimonious bitch was *not* hard evidence in a trial.

I tried getting more details from the guards outside my cell, but they remained hard-faced and silent. After making my voice hoarse from shouting, I slumped onto the bed and went to Lissa's mind, where I was certain I'd get more information.

Lissa was frantic, trying to get answers from anyone she could. Christian was still with her, and they stood inside the foyer of one of the administrative buildings, which was filled with a flurry of activity. Dhampirs and Moroi alike ran everywhere, some frightened of this new government instability and others hoping to take advantage of it. Lissa and Christian stood in the midst of it all, like leaves swept along in a storm's fury.

While Lissa was now technically an adult, she had still always been under the wing of some older person at Court—usually Priscilla Voda, and occasionally even Tatiana. Neither of them was available now, for obvious reasons. While many royals respected her, Lissa had no real source to turn to.

Seeing her agitation, Christian clasped her hand. "Aunt Tasha will know what's going on," he said. "She'll turn up sooner or later. You know she won't let anything happen to Rose."

Lissa knew there was a bit of uncertainty in that statement but didn't mention it. Tasha might not *want* anything to happen to me, but she certainly wasn't all-powerful.

"Lissa!"

Adrian's voice caused both Lissa and Christian to turn around. Adrian had just entered, along with his mother. Adrian looked as though he had literally gone straight from my bedroom to here. He wore yesterday's clothes, slightly rumpled, and his hair was styled with none of his usual care. By comparison, Daniella looked polished and put together, the perfect picture of a businesswoman who hadn't lost her femininity.

At last! Here were people who might have answers. Lissa rushed over to them gratefully.

"Thank God," Lissa said. "No one will tell us what's happened . . . except that the queen is dead and Rose is locked up." Lissa looked up at Daniella's face pleadingly. "Tell me there's been some kind of mistake."

Daniella patted Lissa's shoulder and gave as comforting a look as she could manage, given the circumstances. "I'm afraid not. Tatiana was killed last night, and Rose is their main suspect."

"But she would never have done that!" exclaimed Lissa.

Christian joined her in righteous fury. "Her yelling at the Council that day isn't enough to convict her for murder." Ah, Christian and I had the same line of reasoning. It was almost scary. "Neither is crashing the Death Watch."

"You're right. It's not enough," agreed Daniella. "But it doesn't make her look good either. And apparently, they have other evidence they say proves her guilt."

"What kind of evidence?" Lissa demanded.

Daniella turned apologetic. "I don't know. That's still part of the investigation. They'll have a hearing to present the evidence and question her whereabouts, possible motives . . . that kind of thing." She glanced around at the people rushing by. "If they even get that far. This kind of thing . . . it hasn't happened in ages. The Council gains absolute control until a new monarch is elected, but there's still going to be chaos. People are afraid. I won't be surprised if the Court goes under martial law."

Christian turned to Lissa, hope on his face. "Did you see Rose last night? Was she with you?"

Lissa frowned. "No. I think she was in her room. The last time I saw her was the day before yesterday."

Daniella didn't look happy about that. "That's not going to help. If she was alone, then she has no alibi."

"She wasn't alone."

Three sets of eyes turned in Adrian's direction. It was the first time he'd spoken since first calling to Lissa. Lissa hadn't focused on him too much yet, meaning I hadn't either. She'd only observed his superficial appearance when he arrived, but now she could see the little details. Worry and distress had left their marks, making him look older than he was. When she tuned in to his aura, she saw the usual gold of a spirit user, but it and its other colors were muddied and tinged with darkness. There was a flickering there too, a warning of spirit's instability taking hold. This had all come about too quickly

for him to react, but I suspected he'd hit the cigarettes and liquor as soon as he had a free moment. It was how Adrian coped with this sort of thing.

"What are you saying?" Daniella asked sharply.

Adrian shrugged. "She wasn't alone. I was with her all night."

Lissa and Christian did a good job of maintaining neutral expressions, but Daniella's face registered the shock that any parent would have upon hearing about her child's sex life. Adrian noticed her reaction as well.

"Save it," he warned. "Your morals, your opinions . . . none of it matters right now." He gestured toward a group of panicked people running by, screaming about how Victor Dashkov must have surely come to Court to kill them all. Adrian shook his head and turned back to his mother. "I was with Rose. That proves she didn't do it. We'll deal with your motherly disapproval about my love life later."

"That's not what worries me! If they do have hard evidence and you get mixed up in this, you could be under suspicion too." The composure Daniella had entered with was beginning to crack.

"She was my aunt," cried Adrian incredulously. "Why on earth would Rose and I kill her?"

"Because she disapproved of you dating. And because Rose was upset over the age ruling." This came from Christian. Lissa glared, but he merely shrugged. "What? I'm just stating the obvious. Someone else would if I didn't. And we all heard the stories—people have been making up things that are extreme even for Rose." A strong comment indeed.

"When?" asked Daniella, clutching Adrian's sleeve. "When were you with Rose? When did you get there?"

"I don't know. I don't remember," he said.

She tightened her grip. "Adrian! Take this seriously. This is going to make a huge difference on how things proceed. If you got there before Tatiana was killed, then you won't be tied to it. If you were with Rose afterward—"

"Then she has an alibi," he interrupted. "And there's no problem."

"I hope that's true," murmured Daniella. Her eyes didn't seem focused on my friends anymore. The wheels in her head were spinning, her thoughts jumping ahead as she tried to think how best to protect her son. I had been an unfortunate case for her. He was, understandably, a red-alert emergency for her. "We're still going to have to get you a lawyer. I'll talk to Damon. I have to find him before the hearing tonight. And Rufus will have to know about this too. Damn." Adrian arched an eyebrow at that. I had the impression Lady Ivashkov didn't swear very often. "We *have* to find out what time you were there."

Adrian still wore his distress around him like a cloak and looked as though he might fall over if he didn't get nicotine or alcohol soon. I hated to see him like that, particularly over me. There was strength within him, no question, but his nature—and the sketchy effects of spirit—made coping with this hard. Yet, through his agitation, he managed to pull up a memory to help his frantic mother.

"There was someone in the building lobby when I came in . . . a janitor or something, I think. No one at the front desk, though." Most buildings usually kept a staff member around for emergencies or concierge services.

Daniella's face lit up. "That's it. That's what we'll need. Damon will find out the time you were there so that we can get you free and clear of this."

"*And* so he can defend me if things turn bad?"

"Of course," she answered swiftly.

"What about Rose?"

"What about her?"

Adrian still looked ready to fall apart, but there was seriousness and focus in his green eyes. "If you find out Aunt Tatiana was killed before I was there, and Rose is thrown to the wolves alone, will Damon be her lawyer?"

His mother faltered. "Oh, well, darling . . . Damon doesn't really do that sort of thing. . . ."

"He will if you ask him to," said Adrian sternly.

"Adrian," she said wearily, "you don't know what you're talking about. They say the evidence against her is bad. If our family's shown supporting—"

"It's not like we're supporting murder! You met Rose. You liked her. Can you look me in the eye and say it's okay for her to go in with whatever half-assed defense they dredge up for her? *Can you?*"

Daniella blanched, and I swear, she actually cringed away. I don't think she was used to such fierce resoluteness from her devil-may-care son. And though his words were perfectly sane, there was kind of a crazy desperation in his voice and attitude that was a little scary. Whether that was caused by spirit or just his own emotion, I couldn't say.

"I . . . I'll speak to Damon," Daniella said at last. She'd had to swallow a few times before actually getting the words out.

Adrian let out a deep breath and some of that fury went with it. "Thank you."

She scurried away, melting into the crowd and leaving Adrian alone with Christian and Lissa. The two of them looked only a little less stunned than Daniella had.

"Damon Tarus?" Lissa guessed. Adrian nodded.

"Who's that?" asked Christian.

"My mom's cousin," said Adrian. "The family lawyer. A real shark. Kind of sleazy too, but he can pretty much get anyone out of anything."

"That's something, I suppose," mused Christian. "But is he good enough to fight this so-called hard evidence?"

"I don't know. I really don't know." Adrian absentmindedly reached for his pocket, the usual cigarette spot, but he had none today. He sighed. "I don't know what their evidence is or how Aunt Tatiana even died. All I heard was that they found her dead this morning."

Lissa and Christian exchanged grimaces. Christian shrugged, and Lissa turned back to Adrian, taking on the role of messenger.

"A stake," said Lissa. "They found her in bed with a silver stake through her heart."

Adrian said nothing, and his expression didn't really change. It occurred to Lissa that in all this talk about innocence, evidence, and lawyers, everyone had kind of overlooked the fact that Tatiana had been Adrian's great-aunt. He hadn't approved of some of her decisions and had made plenty of jokes about her behind her back. But she was still his family, someone he'd known his

entire life. He had to be feeling the pain of her death on top of everything else. Even I felt a little conflicted. I hated her for what she'd done to me, but I'd never wanted her dead. And I couldn't help but remember that she'd occasionally spoken to me like I was a real person. Maybe it had been faked, but I was pretty sure she'd been sincere the night she'd stopped by the Ivashkovs'. She'd been weary and thoughtful, mostly just concerned about bringing peace to her people.

Lissa watched Adrian go, sympathy and sorrow flooding through her. Christian gently tapped her arm. "Come on," he said. "We've found out what we needed to know. We're just in the way here."

Feeling helpless, Lissa let him lead her outside, dodging more panicked crowds. The orange of a low sun gave every leaf and tree a golden, warm feel. There had been a lot of people out when we returned from the warehouse with Dimitri, but it was nothing compared to this. People were buzzing with fear, hurrying to pass the news. Some were already in mourning, clad in black, with tears on their faces. I wondered how much of that was real. Even in the midst of tragedy and crime, royals would be scrambling for power.

And each time she heard my name, Lissa would grow more and more angry. It was the bad anger too, the kind that felt like black smoke in our bond and often made her lash out. It was spirit's curse.

"I can't believe this!" she exclaimed to Christian. I noticed, even if she didn't, that he was hurriedly taking her somewhere where there weren't people. "How could anyone think that about Rose? It's a set up. It *has* to be."

"I know, I know," he said. He knew spirit's danger signs too and was trying to calm her down. They'd reached a small, grassy area in the shade of a large hazelnut tree and settled onto the ground. "We know she didn't do it. That's all there is to it. We'll prove it. She can't be punished for something she didn't do."

"You don't know this group," grumbled Lissa. "If someone's out to get her, they can make all sorts of things possible." With only the faintest awareness, I drew a little of that darkness from her into me, trying to calm her down. Unfortunately, it just made me angrier.

Christian laughed. "You forget. I grew up around this group. I went to school with this group's kids. I know them—but we're not panicking until we know more, okay?"

Lissa exhaled, feeling much better. I was going to take too much darkness if I wasn't careful. She gave Christian a small, tentative smile.

"I don't remember you being this reasonable before."

"It's because everyone has different definitions of 'reasonable. ' Mine's just misunderstood, that's all." His voice was lofty.

"I think you must be misunderstood a lot," she laughed.

His eyes held hers, and the smile on his face transformed into something warmer and softer. "Well, I hope this isn't misunderstood. Otherwise, I might get punched."

Leaning over, he brought his lips to hers. Lissa responded with no hesitation or thought whatsoever, losing herself in the sweetness of the kiss. Unfortunately, I was swept along with it. When they pulled away, Lissa felt her heart rate increase and her cheeks flush.

“What exactly was that the definition of?” she asked, reliving how his mouth had felt.

“It means ‘I’m sorry,’” he said.

She looked away and nervously plucked at some of the grass. Finally, with a sigh, she looked back up. “Christian . . . was there ever . . . was there ever anything between you and Jill? Or Mia?”

He stared in surprise. “What? How could you think that?”

“You spent so much time with them.”

“There is only one person I have ever wanted,” he said. The steadiness of his gaze, of those crystal blue eyes, left no question as to who that person was. “No one else has ever come close. In spite of everything, even with Avery—”

“Christian, I’m so sorry for that—”

“You don’t have to—”

“I do—”

“Damn it,” he said. “Will you let me finish a sent—”

“No,” Lissa interrupted. And she leaned over and kissed him, a hard and powerful kiss that burned through her body, one that told her there was no one else in the world for her either.

Well. Apparently Tasha had been right: I was the only one who could bring them back together. I just somehow hadn’t expected my arrest to play a role.

I pulled away from her head to give them some privacy and save myself from watching them make out. I didn’t begrudge them their moment. There was nothing either could do for me right now, and they deserved their reunion. Their only course of action was to wait for more information, and really, their method of passing time was a lot healthier than whatever Adrian was probably doing.

I lay down on the bed and stared up at the ceiling. There was nothing but plain metal and neutral colors around me. It drove me crazy. I had nothing to watch, nothing to read. I felt like an animal trapped in a cage. The room seemed to grow smaller and smaller. All I could do was replay what I’d learned via Lissa, analyzing every word of what had been said. I had questions about everything, of course, but the one thing that stuck with me was Daniella mentioning a hearing. I needed to know more about that.

I got my answer—hours later.

I’d fallen into sort of a numb haze by then and almost didn’t recognize Mikhail standing in front of my cell door. I leapt from my bed to the bars and saw that he was unlocking the door. Hope surged through me.

“What’s going on?” I asked. “Are they letting me go?”

“I’m afraid not,” he said. His point was proven when, after opening the door, he promptly put my hands in cuffs. I didn’t fight it. “I’m here to take you to your hearing.”

Stepping into the hall, I saw other guardians gathered. My own security detail. A mirror of Dimitri’s. Lovely. Mikhail and I walked together, and mercifully, he spoke along the way instead of maintaining that awful silence that seemed to be common treatment for prisoners.

“What’s the hearing exactly? A trial?”

“No, no. Too soon for a trial. A hearing decides whether you’re going to trial.”

“That sounds kind of like a waste of time,” I pointed out. We emerged from the guardians’ building, and that fresh, damp air was the sweetest thing I’d ever tasted.

“It’s a bigger waste of time if you go to a full-fledged trial, and they realize there was no case to stand on. At the hearing, they’ll lay out all the evidence they have, and a judge—or, well, someone acting as a judge—will decide if you should have a trial. The trial makes it official. That’s where they pass the verdict and dole out the punishment.”

“Why’d they take so long for the hearing? Why’d they make me wait in that cell all day?”

He laughed, but not because he thought it was funny. “This is fast, Rose. Very fast. It can take days or weeks to get a hearing, and if you do go to trial, you’ll stay locked up until then.”

I swallowed. “Will they move fast on that too?”

“I don’t know. No monarch’s been murdered in almost a hundred years. People are running wild, and the Council wants to establish order. They’re already making huge plans for the queen’s funeral—a giant spectacle that’ll distract everyone. Your hearing is also an attempt to establish order.”

“What? How?”

“The sooner they convict the murderer, the safer everyone will feel. They think this case against you is so solid, they want to rush it through. They *want* you to be guilty. They want to bury her knowing her killer is moving toward justice, so that everyone can sleep easy when the new king or queen is elected.”

“But I didn’t—” I let my denial go. There was no point.

Ahead of us, the building that housed the courtroom loomed. It had seemed forbidding the first time I’d been here for Victor’s trial, but that had been owing to fear of the memories he sparked in me. Now . . . now it was my own future on the line. And apparently not just my own future—the Moroi world was watching and waiting, hoping I was a villain who could be safely put away forever. Swallowing, I gave Mikhail a nervous look.

“Do you think . . . do you think they’ll send me to trial?”

He didn’t answer. One of the guards held the door open for us.

“Mikhail?” I urged. “Will they really put me on trial for murder?”

“Yes,” he said sympathetically. “I’m pretty sure they will.”

TWENTY-SEVEN

WALKING INTO THE COURTROOM was one of the most surreal experiences of my life—and not just because I was the one being accused here. It just kept reminding me of Victor's trial, and the idea that I was now in his place was almost too weird to comprehend.

Entering a room with a troop of guardians makes people stare—and believe me, there were a lot of people packed in there—so naturally, I didn't skulk or look ashamed. I walked with confidence, my head held high. Again, I had that eerie flashback to Victor. He too had walked in defiantly, and I'd been appalled that someone who had committed his crimes could behave that way. Were these people thinking the same thing about me?

On the dais at the front of the room sat a woman I didn't recognize. Among the Moroi, a judge was usually a lawyer who had been appointed to the position for the purposes of the hearing or whatever. The trial itself—at least a big one like Victor's—had been presided over by the queen. She had been the one to ultimately decide the final verdict. Here, the Council members would be the ones to decide if I even reached that stage. *The trial makes it official. That's where they pass the verdict and dole out the punishment.*

My escort took me to the front seating of the room, past the bar that separated the key players from the audience, and motioned me toward a spot next to a middle-aged Moroi in a very formal and very designer black suit. The suit screamed, *I'm sorry the queen is dead, and I'm going to look fashionable while showing my grief.* His hair was a pale blond, lightly laced with the first signs of silver. Somehow, he made it look good. I presumed this was Damon Tarus, my lawyer, but he didn't say a word to me.

Mikhail sat beside me as well, and I was glad they'd chosen him to be the one who literally didn't leave my side. Glancing back, I saw Daniella and Nathan Ivashkov sitting with other high-ranking royals and their families. Adrian had chosen not to join them. He sat farther back, with Lissa, Christian, and Eddie. All of their faces were filled with worry.

The judge—an elderly, gray-haired Moroi who looked like she could still kick ass—called the room to attention, and I twisted around to face forward again. The Council was entering, and she announced them one by one. Two sets of benches had been arranged for them, two rows of six with a thirteenth in back raised. Of course, only eleven of the spots were filled, and I tried not to scowl. Lissa should have been sitting there.

When the Council was settled, the judge turned to face the rest of us and spoke in a voice that rang through the room. "This hearing is now in order, in which we will determine whether there is enough evidence to—"

A commotion at the door cut her off, and the audience craned their necks to see what was going on.

"What's this disturbance about?" the judge demanded.

One of the guardians had the door partially open and was leaning out, apparently speaking to whoever was in the hall. He ducked back into the room. “The accused’s lawyer is here, Your Honor.”

The judge glanced at Damon and me and then delivered a frown to the guardian. “She already has a lawyer.”

The guardian shrugged and appeared comically helpless. If there had been a Strigoi out there, he would have known what to do. This bizarre interruption of protocol was beyond his skill set. The judge sighed.

“Fine. Send whoever it is up here and let’s get this settled.”

Abe walked in.

“Oh dear lord,” I said out loud.

I didn’t have to scold myself for speaking out of turn because a hum of conversation immediately filled the room. My guess was that half were in awe because they knew Abe and his reputation. The other half were probably just stunned by his appearance.

He wore a gray cashmere suit, considerably lighter than Damon’s grim black. Underneath it was a dress shirt that was so bright a white, it seemed to glow—particularly next to the brilliant crimson silk tie he wore. Other spots of red were scattered about his outfit—a handkerchief in the pocket, ruby cuff links. Naturally, it was all as perfectly tailored and expensive as Damon’s outfit. But Abe didn’t look like he was in mourning. He didn’t even look like he was coming to a trial. It was more like he’d been interrupted on his way to a party. And of course, he sported his usual gold hoop earrings and trimmed black beard.

The judge silenced the room with a hand motion as he strutted up to her.

“Ibrahim Mazur,” she said, with a shake of her head. There were equal parts amazement and disapproval in her voice. “This is . . . unexpected.”

Abe swept her a gallant bow. “It’s lovely to see you again, Paula. You haven’t aged a day.”

“We aren’t at a country club, Mr. Mazur,” she informed him. “And while here, you will address me by my proper title.”

“Ah. Right.” He winked. “My apologies, Your Honor.” Turning, he glanced around until his eyes rested on me. “There she is. Sorry to have delayed this. Let’s get started.”

Damon stood up. “What is this? Who *are* you? I’m her lawyer.”

Abe shook his head. “There must have been some mistake. It took me a while to get a flight here, so I can see why you would have appointed a community lawyer to fill in.”

“Community lawyer!” Damon’s face grew red with indignation. “I’m one of the most renowned lawyers among American Moroi.”

“Renowned, community.” Abe shrugged and leaned back on his heals. “I don’t judge. No pun intended.”

“Mr. Mazur,” interrupted the judge, “are *you* a lawyer?”

“I’m a lot of things, Paula—Your Honor. Besides, does it matter? She only needs someone to speak for her.”

“And she has someone,” exclaimed Damon. “Me.”

“Not anymore,” said Abe, his demeanor still very pleasant. He had never stopped smiling, but I thought I saw that dangerous glint in his eyes that

frightened so many of his enemies. He was the picture of calm, while Damon looked like he was ready to have a seizure.

"Your Honor—"

"Enough!" she said in that resounding voice of hers. "Let the girl choose." She fixed her brown eyes on me. "Who do you want to speak for you?"

"I . . ." My mouth dropped open at how abruptly the attention shifted to me. I'd been watching the drama between the two men like a tennis match, and now the ball had hit me in the head.

"Rose."

Startled, I turned slightly. Daniella Ivashkov had crept over in the row behind me. "Rose," she whispered again, "you have no idea who that Mazur man is." Oh, didn't I? "You want nothing to do with him. Damon's the best. He's not easy to get."

She moved back to her seat, and I looked between my two potential lawyers' faces. I understood Daniella's meaning. Adrian had talked her into getting Damon for me, and then she had talked Damon into actually doing it. Rejecting him would be an insult to her, and considering she was one of the few royal Moroi who'd been nice to me about Adrian, I certainly didn't want to earn her dislike. Besides, if this was some setup by royals, having one of them on my side was probably my best chance at getting off.

And yet . . . there was Abe, looking at me with that clever smile of his. He was certainly very good at getting his way, but a lot of that was by force of his presence and reputation. If there really was some absurd evidence against me, Abe's attitude wouldn't be enough to make it go away. Of course, he was sly, too. The serpent. He could make the impossible happen; he'd certainly pulled a lot of strings for me.

That did not, however, change the fact that he wasn't a lawyer.

On the other hand, he was my father.

He was my father, and although we still barely knew each other, he'd gone to great lengths to get here and saunter in with his gray suit to defend me. Was it fatherly love gone bad? Was he really all that good a lawyer? And at the end of the day, was it true that blood ran thicker than water? I didn't know. I actually didn't like that saying. Maybe it worked for humans, but it made no sense with vampires.

Anyway, Abe was staring at me intently with dark brown eyes nearly identical to mine. *Trust me*, he seemed to say. But could I? Could I trust my family? I would have trusted my mother if she were here—and I knew she trusted Abe.

I sighed and gestured toward him. "I'll take him." In an undertone, I added, "Don't let me down, Zmey."

Abe's smile grew broader as shocked exclamations filled the audience, and Damon protested in outrage. Daniella might have had to persuade him to take me on in the beginning, but now this case had become a matter of pride for him. His reputation had just been sullied by me passing him up.

But I'd made my choice, and the exasperated judge would hear no more arguments about it. She shooed Damon away, and Abe slid into his seat. The judge began with the standard opening speech, explaining why we were here, etc., etc. As she spoke, I leaned toward Abe.

“What have you gotten me into?” I hissed to him.

“Me? What have *you* gotten yourself into? Couldn’t I have just picked you up at the police station for underage drinking, like most fathers?”

I was beginning to understand why people got irritated when I made jokes in dangerous situations.

“My fucking future’s on the line! They’re going to send me to trial and convict me!”

Every trace of humor or cheer vanished from his face. His expression grew hard, deadly serious. A chill ran down my spine.

“That,” he said in a low, flat voice, “is something I swear to you is never, ever going to happen.”

The judge turned her attention back to us and the prosecuting lawyer, a woman called Iris Kane. Not a royal name, but she still looked pretty hard-core. Maybe that was just a lawyer thing.

Before the evidence against me was laid out, the queen’s murder was also described in all its grisly detail. How’d she’d been found this morning in bed, a silver stake through her heart and a profound look of horror and shock on her face. Blood had been everywhere: on her nightgown, the sheets, her skin . . . The pictures were shown to everyone in the room, triggering a variety of reactions. Gasps of surprise. More fear and panic. And some . . . some people wept. Some of those tears were undoubtedly because of the whole terrible situation, but I think many cried because they’d loved or liked Tatiana. She’d been cold and stiff at times, but for the most part, her reign had been a peaceful and just one.

After the pictures, they called me up. The hearing didn’t run the way a normal trial did. There was no formal switching back of lawyers as they questioned witnesses. They each just sort of stood there and took turns asking questions while the judge kept order.

“Miss Hathaway,” began Iris, dropping my title. “What time did you return to your room last night?”

“I don’t know the exact time. . . .” I focused on her and Abe, not the sea of faces out there. “Somewhere around 5 a.m., I think. Maybe 6.”

“Was anyone with you?”

“No, well—yes. Later.” Oh, God. *Here it comes*. “Um, Adrian Ivashkov visited me.”

“What time did he arrive?” asked Abe.

“I’m not sure of that either. A few hours after I got back, I guess.”

Abe turned his charming smile on Iris, who was rustling through some papers. “The queen’s murder has been pretty accurately narrowed down to between seven and eight. Rose wasn’t alone—of course, we would need Mr. Ivashkov to testify to that effect.”

My eyes flicked briefly to the audience. Daniella looked pale. This was her nightmare: Adrian getting involved. Glancing farther over, I saw that Adrian himself seemed eerily calm. I really hoped he wasn’t drunk.

Iris held up a sheet of paper triumphantly. “We have a signed statement from a janitor who says Mr. Ivashkov arrived at the defendant’s building at approximately nine twenty.”

“That’s pretty specific,” said Abe. He sounded amused, like she’d said

something cute. “Do you have any desk staff to confirm that?”

“No,” Iris said icily. “But this is enough. The janitor remembers because he was about to take his break. Miss Hathaway was alone when the murder took place. She has no alibi.”

“Well,” said Abe, “at least according to some questionable ‘facts.’”

But no more was said about the time. The evidence was admitted into the official records, and I took a deep breath. I hadn’t liked that line of questioning, but it had been expected, based on the earlier conversations I’d heard via Lissa. The no-alibi thing wasn’t good, but I kind of shared Abe’s vibe. What they had so far still didn’t seem strong enough to send me to trial. Plus, they hadn’t asked anything else about Adrian, which left him out of this.

“Next exhibit,” said Iris. There was smug triumph all over her face. She knew the time thing was sketchy, but whatever was coming up, she thought it was gold.

But actually, it was silver. A silver stake.

So help me, she had a silver stake in a clear plastic container. It gleamed in the incandescent lighting—except for its tip. That was dark. With blood.

“This is the stake used to kill the queen,” declared Iris. “Miss Hathaway’s stake.”

Abe actually laughed. “Oh, come on. Guardians are issued stakes all the time. They have an enormous, identical supply.”

Iris ignored him and looked at me. “Where is your stake right now?”

I frowned. “In my room.”

She turned and glanced out over the crowd. “Guardian Stone?”

A tall dhampir with a bushy black mustache rose from the crowd. “Yes?”

“You conducted the search of Miss Hathaway’s room and belongings, correct?”

I gaped in outrage. “You searched my—”

A sharp look from Abe silenced me.

“Correct,” said the guardian.

“And did you find any silver stakes?” asked Iris.

“No.”

She turned back to us, still smug, but Abe seemed to find this new information even more ridiculous than the last batch. “That proves nothing. She could have lost the stake without realizing it.”

“Lost it in the queen’s heart?”

“Miss Kane,” warned the judge.

“My apologies, Your Honor,” said Iris smoothly. She turned to me. “Miss Hathaway, is there anything special about your stake? Anything that would distinguish it from others?”

“Y-yes.”

“Can you describe that?”

I swallowed. I had a bad feeling about this. “It has a pattern etched near the top. A kind of geometric design.” Guardians had engraving done sometimes. I’d found this stake in Siberia and kept it. Well, actually, Dimitri had sent it to me after it had come loose from his chest.

Iris walked over to the Council and held out the container so that each of them could examine it. Returning to me, she gave me my turn. “Is this your

pattern? Your stake?"

I stared. It was indeed. My mouth opened, ready to say *yes*, but then I caught Abe's eye. Clearly, he couldn't talk directly to me, but he sent a lot of messages in that gaze. The biggest one was to be careful, be sly. What would a slippery person like Abe do?

"It . . . it looks *similar* to the design on mine," I said at last. "But I can't say for sure if it's the exact same one." Abe's smile told me I'd answered correctly.

"Of course you can't," Iris said, as though she'd expected no better. She handed off the container to one of the court clerks. "But now that the Council has seen that the design matches her description and is *almost* like her stake, I would like to point out that testing has revealed"—she held up more papers, victory all over her face—"that her fingerprints are on it."

There, it was. The big score. The "hard evidence."

"Any other fingerprints?" asked the judge.

"No, Your Honor. Just hers."

"That means nothing," said Abe with a shrug. I had a feeling that if I stood and suddenly confessed to the murder, he would still claim it was dubious evidence. "Someone steals her stake and wears gloves. Her fingerprints would be on it because it's *hers*."

"That's getting kind of convoluted, don't you think?" asked Iris.

"The evidence is still full of holes," he protested. "That's what's convoluted. How could she have gotten into the queen's bedroom? How could she have gotten through the guards?"

"Well," mused Iris, "those would be questions best explored in trial, but considering Miss Hathaway's extensive record of breaking into and out of places, as well as the countless other disciplinary marks she has, I don't doubt she could have found any number of ways to get inside."

"You have no proof," said Abe. "No theory."

"We don't need it," said Iris. "Not at this point. We have more than enough to go to trial, don't we? I mean, we haven't even gotten to the part where countless witnesses heard Miss Hathaway tell the queen she'd regret establishing the recent guardian law. I can find the transcript if you like—not to mention reports of other 'expressive' commentary Miss Hathaway made in public."

A memory came back to me, of standing outside with Daniella while I ranted—with others watching—about how the queen couldn't buy me off with an assignment. Not a good decision on my part. Neither was busting in on the Death Watch or complaining about the queen being worth protecting when Lissa had been captured. I'd given Iris a lot of material.

"Oh yes," Iris continued. "We also have accounts of the queen declaring her extreme disapproval of Miss Hathaway's involvement with Adrian Ivashkov, particularly when the two ran off to elope." I opened my mouth at that, but Abe silenced me. "There are countless other records of Her Majesty and Miss Hathaway sparring in public. Would you like me to find those papers too, or are we able to vote on a trial now?"

This was directed at the judge. I had no legal background, but the evidence was pretty damning. I would have said that there was definitely reason to consider me a murder suspect, except . . .

“Your Honor?” I asked. I think she’d been about to give her declaration. “Can I say something?”

The judge thought about it, then shrugged. “I see no reason not to. We’re collecting all the evidence there is.”

Oh, me freelancing was *not* in Abe’s plan at all. He strode to the stand, hoping to stop me with his wise counsel, but he wasn’t fast enough.

“Okay,” I said, hoping I sounded reasonable and wasn’t going to lose my temper. “You’ve put up a lot of suspicious stuff here. I can see that.” Abe looked pained. It was not an expression I’d seen on him before. He didn’t lose control of situations very often. “But that’s the thing. It’s *too* suspicious. If I were going to murder someone, I wouldn’t be that stupid. Do you think I’d leave my stake stuck in her chest? Do you think I wouldn’t wear gloves? Come on. That’s insulting. If I’m as crafty as you claim my record says I am, then why would I do it this way? I mean, seriously? If I did it, it’d be a lot better. You’d never even peg me as a suspect. This is all really kind of an insult to my intelligence.”

“Rose—” began Abe, a dangerous note in his tone. I kept going.

“All this evidence you’ve got is so painfully obvious. Hell, whoever set this up might as well have painted an arrow straight to me—and someone *did* set me up, but you guys are too stupid to even consider that.” The volume of my voice was rising, and I consciously brought it back to normal levels. “You want an easy answer. A quick answer. And you especially want someone with no connections, no powerful family to protect them . . .” I hesitated there, unsure how to classify Abe. “Because that’s how it always is. That’s how it was with that age law. No one was able to stand up for the dhampirs either because this goddamned system won’t allow it.”

It occurred to me then that I had strayed pretty far off the subject—and was making myself look more guilty by slamming the age law. I reined myself back in.

“Um, anyway, Your Honor . . . what I’m trying to say is that this evidence shouldn’t be enough to accuse me or send me to trial. I wouldn’t plan a murder this badly.”

“Thank you, Miss Hathaway,” said the judge. “That was very . . . informative. You may take your seat now while the Council votes.”

Abe and I returned to our bench. “What in the world were you thinking?” he whispered.

“I was telling it like it is. I was defending myself.”

“I wouldn’t go that far. You’re no lawyer.”

I gave him a sidelong look. “Neither are you, old man.”

The judge asked the Council to vote on whether they believed there was enough evidence to make me a viable suspect and send me to trial. They did. Eleven hands went up. Just like that, it was over.

Through the bond, I felt Lissa’s alarm. As Abe and I rose to leave, I looked out in the audience, which was starting to disband and buzzing with talk over what would happen now. Her light green eyes were wide, her face unusually pale. Beside her, Adrian too looked distressed, but as he stared at me, I could see love and determination radiating. And in the back, behind both of them . . .

Dimitri.

I hadn't even known he was here. His eyes were on me too, dark and endless. Only I couldn't read what he was feeling. His face betrayed nothing, but there was something in his eyes . . . something intense and intimidating. The image of him ready to take down that group of guardians flashed through my mind, and something told me that if I asked, he would do it again. He would fight his way to me through this courtroom and do everything in his power to rescue me from it.

A brushing of my hand distracted me from him. Abe and I had started to exit, but the aisle ahead of us was packed with people, bringing us to a halt. The touch against my hand was a small piece of paper shoved between my fingers. Glancing over, I saw Ambrose was sitting near the aisle, staring straight ahead. I wanted to ask what was going on, but some instinct kept me silent. Seeing as the line still wasn't moving, I hastily opened the paper, keeping it out of Abe's sight.

The paper was tiny, its elegant cursive almost impossible to read.

Rose,

If you're reading this, then something terrible has happened. You probably hate me, and I don't blame you. I can only ask that you trust that what I did with the age decree was better for your people than what others had planned. There are some Moroi who want to force all *dhampirs into service, whether they want it or not, by using compulsion. The age decree has slowed that faction down.*

However, I write to you with a secret you must put right, and it is a secret you must share with as few as possible. Vasilisa needs her spot on the Council, and it can be done. She is not the last Dragomir. Another lives, the illegitimate child of Eric Dragomir. I know nothing else, but if you can find this son or daughter, you will give Vasilisa the power she deserves. No matter your faults and dangerous temperament, you are the only one I feel can take on this task. Waste no time in fulfilling it.

—Tatiana Ivashkov

I stared at the piece of paper, its writing swirling before me, but its message burning into my mind. *She is not the last Dragomir. Another lives.*

If that was true, if Lissa had a half-brother or half-sister . . . it would change everything. She would get a vote on the Council. She would no longer be alone. *If* it was true. *If* this was from Tatiana. Anyone could sign her name to a piece of paper. It didn't make it real. Still, I shivered, troubled at the thought of getting a letter from a dead woman. If I allowed myself to see the ghosts around us, would Tatiana be there, restless and vengeful? I couldn't bring myself to let down my walls and look. Not yet. There had to be other answers. Ambrose had given me the note. I needed to ask him . . . except we were moving down the aisle again. A guardian nudged me along.

"What's that?" asked Abe, always alert and suspicious.

I hastily folded the note back up. "Nothing."

The look he gave me told me he didn't believe that at all. I wondered if I should tell him. *It is a secret you must share with as few as possible.* If he was one of the few, this wasn't the place. I tried to distract him from it and shake the

dumbstruck look that must have been on my face. This note was a big problem—but not quite as big as the one immediately facing me.

"You told me I wouldn't go to trial," I said to Abe. My earlier annoyance returned. "I took a big chance with you!"

"It wasn't a big chance. Tarus couldn't have got you out of this either."

Abe's easy attitude about all this infuriated me further. "Are you saying you knew this hearing was a lost cause from the beginning?" It was what Mikhail had said too. How nice to have such faith from everyone.

"This hearing wasn't important," Abe said evasively. "What happens next is."

"And what is that exactly?"

He gave me that dark, sly gaze again. "Nothing you need to worry about yet."

One of the guardians put his hand on my arm, telling me I needed to move. I resisted his pull and leaned toward Abe.

"The hell I don't! This is my life we're talking about," I exclaimed. I knew what would come next. Imprisonment until the trial. And then more imprisonment if I was convicted. "This is serious! I don't want to go to trial! I don't want to spend the rest of my life in a place like Tarasov."

The guard tugged harder, pushing us forward, and Abe fixed me with a piercing gaze that made my blood run cold.

"You will *not* go to trial. You will *not* go to prison," he hissed, out of the guards' hearing. "I won't allow it. Do you understand?"

I shook my head, confused over so much and not knowing what to do about any of it. "Even you have your limits, old man."

His smile returned. "You'd be surprised. Besides, they don't even send royal traitors to prison, Rose. Everyone knows that."

I scoffed. "Are you insane? Of course they do. What else do you think they do with traitors? Set them free and tell them not to do it again?"

"No," said Abe, just before he turned away. "They execute traitors."

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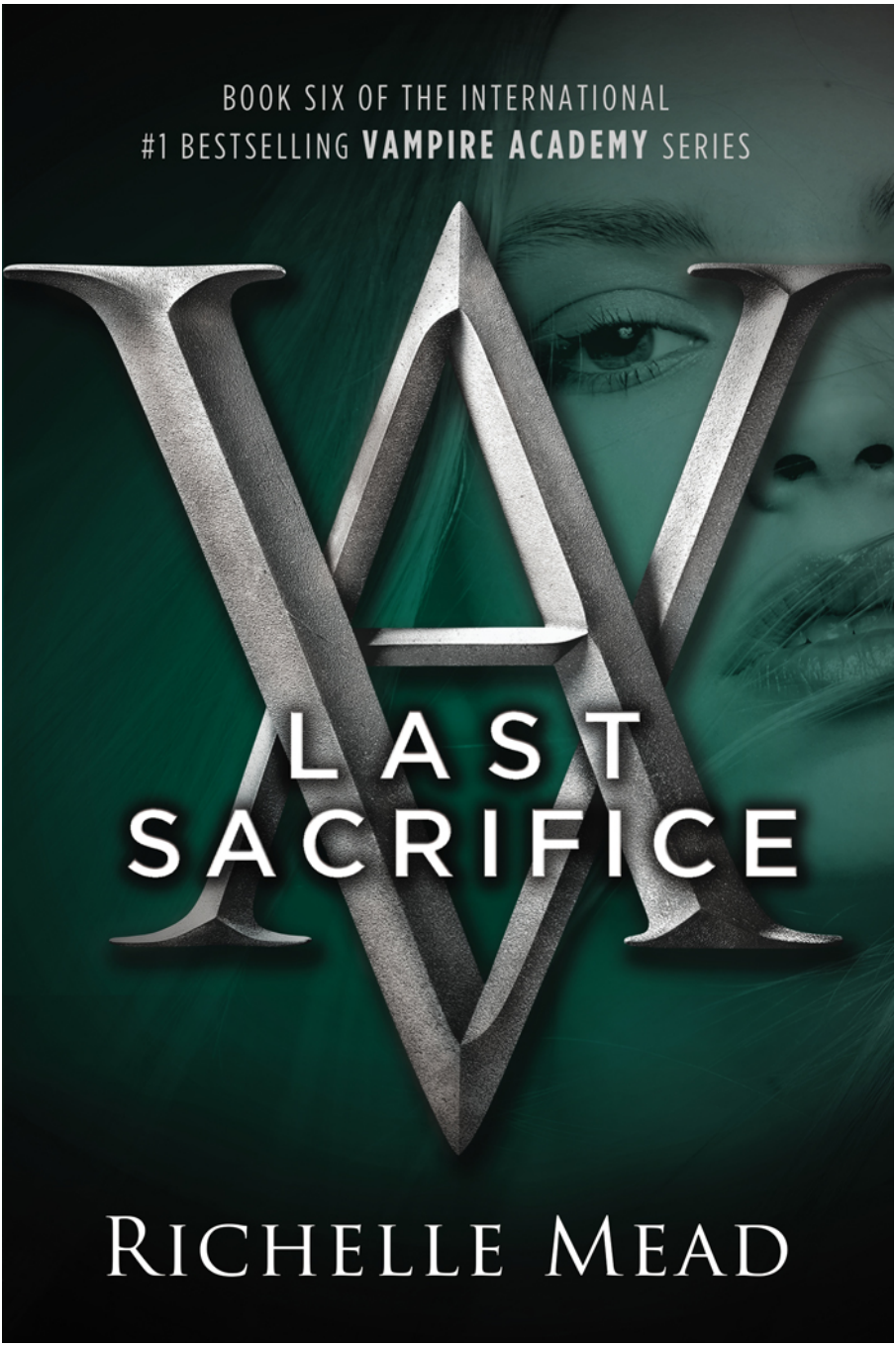
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Special Excerpt from Bloodlines

Last Sacrifice

Richelle Mead

Last Sacrifice

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This is dedicated to Rich Bailey and Alan Doty, the teachers who had the greatest influence on my writing, and to all my teacher friends out there helping young writers now. Keep fighting the good fight, all of you.

ONE

I DON'T LIKE CAGES.

I don't even like going to zoos. The first time I went to one, I almost had a claustrophobic attack looking at those poor animals. I couldn't imagine any creature living that way. Sometimes I even felt a little bad for criminals, condemned to life in a cell. I'd certainly never expected to spend *my* life in one.

But lately, life seemed to be throwing me a lot of things I'd never expected, because here I was, locked away.

"Hey!" I yelled, gripping the steel bars that isolated me from the world. "How long am I going to be here? When's my trial? You can't keep me in this dungeon forever!"

Okay, it wasn't exactly a dungeon, not in the dark, rusty-chain sense. I was inside a small cell with plain walls, a plain floor, and well . . . plain everything. Spotless. Sterile. Cold. It was actually more depressing than any musty dungeon could have managed. The bars in the doorway felt cool against my skin, hard and unyielding. Fluorescent lighting made the metal gleam in a way that felt harsh and irritating to my eyes. I could see the shoulder of a man standing rigidly to the side of the cell's entrance and knew there were probably four more guardians in the hallway out of my sight. I also knew none of them were going to answer me back, but that hadn't stopped me from constantly demanding answers from them for the last two days.

When the usual silence came, I sighed and slumped back on the cot in the cell's corner. Like everything else in my new home, the cot was colorless and stark. Yeah. I really was starting to wish I had a real dungeon. Rats and cobwebs would have at least given me something to watch. I stared upward and immediately had the disorienting feeling I always did in here: that the ceiling and walls were closing in around me. Like I couldn't breathe. Like the sides of the cell would keep coming toward me until no space remained, pushing out all the air . . .

I sat up abruptly, gasping. *Don't stare at the walls and ceiling, Rose*, I chastised myself. Instead, I looked down at my clasped hands and tried to figure out how I'd gotten into this mess.

The initial answer was obvious: someone had framed me for a crime I didn't commit. And it wasn't petty crime either. It was murder. They'd had the audacity to accuse me of the highest crime a Moroi or dhampir could commit. Now, that isn't to say I haven't killed before. I have. I've also done my fair

share of rule (and even law) breaking. Cold-blooded murder, however, was not in my repertoire. Especially not the murder of a queen.

It was true Queen Tatiana hadn't been a friend of mine. She'd been the coolly calculating ruler of the Moroi—a race of living, magic-using vampires who didn't kill their victims for blood. Tatiana and I had had a rocky relationship for a number of reasons. One was me dating her great-nephew, Adrian. The other was my disapproval of her policies on how to fight off Strigoi—the evil, undead vampires who stalked us all. Tatiana had tricked me a number of times, but I'd never wanted her dead. Someone apparently had, however, and they'd left a trail of evidence leading right to me, the worst of which were my fingerprints all over the silver stake that had killed Tatiana. Of course, it was *my* stake, so naturally it'd have my fingerprints. No one seemed to think that was relevant.

I sighed again and pulled out a tiny crumpled piece of paper from my pocket. My only reading material. I squeezed it in my hand, having no need to look at the words. I'd long since memorized them. The note's contents made me question what I'd known about Tatiana. It had made me question a lot of things.

Frustrated with my own surroundings, I slipped out of them and into someone else's: my best friend Lissa's. Lissa was a Moroi, and we shared a psychic link, one that let me go to her mind and see the world through her eyes. All Moroi wielded some type of elemental magic. Lissa's was spirit, an element tied to psychic and healing powers. It was rare among Moroi, who usually used more physical elements, and we barely understood its abilities—which were incredible. She'd used spirit to bring me back from the dead a few years ago, and that's what had forged our bond.

Being in her mind freed me from my cage but offered little help for my problem. Lissa had been working hard to prove my innocence, ever since the hearing that had laid out all the evidence against me. My stake being used in the murder had only been the beginning. My opponents had been quick to remind everyone about my antagonism toward the queen and had also found a witness to testify about my whereabouts during the murder. That testimony had left me without an alibi. The Council had decided there was enough evidence to send me to a full-fledged trial—where I would receive my verdict.

Lissa had been trying desperately to get people's attention and convince them I'd been framed. She was having trouble finding anyone who would listen, however, because the entire Moroi Royal Court was consumed with preparations for Tatiana's elaborate funeral. A monarch's death was a big deal. Moroi and dhampirs—half-vampires like me—were coming from all over the world to see the spectacle. Food, flowers, decorations, even musicians . . . The full deal. If Tatiana had gotten married, I doubted the event would have been this elaborate. With so much activity and buzz, no one cared about me now. As far as most people were concerned, I was safely stashed away and unable to kill again. Tatiana's murderer had been found. Justice was served. Case closed.

Before I could get a clear picture of Lissa's surroundings, a commotion at the jail jerked me back into my own head. Someone had entered the area and was speaking to the guards, asking to see me. It was my first visitor in days. My heart pounded, and I leapt up to the bars, hoping it was someone who would

tell me this had all been a horrible mistake.

My visitor wasn't *quite* who I'd expected.

"Old man," I said wearily. "What are you doing here?"

Abe Mazur stood before me. As always, he was a sight to behold. It was the middle of summer—hot and humid, seeing as we were right in the middle of rural Pennsylvania—but that didn't stop him from wearing a full suit. It was a flashy one, perfectly tailored and adorned with a brilliant purple silk tie and matching scarf that just seemed like overkill. Gold jewelry flashed against the dusky hue of his skin, and he looked like he'd recently trimmed his short black beard. Abe was a Moroi, and although he wasn't royal, he wielded enough influence to be.

He also happened to be my father.

"I'm your lawyer," he said cheerfully. "Here to give you legal counsel, of course."

"You aren't a lawyer," I reminded him. "And your last bit of advice didn't work out so well." That was mean of me. Abe—despite having no legal training whatsoever—had defended me at my hearing. Obviously, since I was locked up and headed for trial, the outcome of that hadn't been so great. But, in all my solitude, I'd come to realize that he'd been right about something. No lawyer, no matter how good, could have saved me at the hearing. I had to give him credit for stepping up to a lost cause, though considering our sketchy relationship, I still wasn't sure why he had. My biggest theories were that he didn't trust royals and that he felt paternal obligation. In that order.

"My performance was perfect," he argued. "Whereas your compelling speech in which you said ‘if I was the murderer' didn't do us any favors. Putting that image in the judge's head wasn't the smartest thing you could have done."

I ignored the barb and crossed my arms. "So what are you doing here? I know it's not just a fatherly visit. You never do anything without a reason."

"Of course not. Why do anything without a reason?"

"Don't start up with your circular logic."

He winked. "No need to be jealous. If you work hard and put your mind to it, you might just inherit my brilliant logic skills someday."

"Abe," I warned. "Get on with it."

"Fine, fine," he said. "I've come to tell you that your trial might be moved up."

"W-what? That's great news!" At least, I thought it was. His expression said otherwise. Last I'd heard, my trial might be months away. The mere thought of that—of being in this cell so long—made me feel claustrophobic again.

"Rose, you do realize that your trial will be nearly identical to your hearing. Same evidence and a guilty verdict."

"Yeah, but there must be something we can do before that, right? Find proof to clear me?" Suddenly, I had a good idea of what the problem was. "When you say ‘moved up,' how soon are we talking?"

"Ideally, they'd like to do it after a new king or queen is crowned. You know, part of the post-coronation festivities."

His tone was flippant, but as I held his dark gaze, I caught the full meaning. Numbers rattled in my head. "The funeral's this week, and the elections are right after . . . You're saying I could go to trial and be convicted in, what,

practically two weeks?"

Abe nodded.

I flew toward the bars again, my heart pounding in my chest. "*Two weeks*? Are you serious?"

When he'd said the trial had been moved up, I'd figured maybe it was a month away. Enough time to find new evidence. How would I have pulled that off? Unclear. Now, time was rushing away from me. Two weeks wasn't enough, especially with so much activity at Court. Moments ago, I'd resented the long stretch of time I might face. Now, I had too little of it, and the answer to my next question could make things worse.

"How long?" I asked, trying to control the trembling in my voice. "How long after the verdict until they . . . carry out the sentence?"

I still didn't entirely know what all I'd inherited from Abe, but we seemed to clearly share one trait: an unflinching ability to deliver bad news.

"Probably immediately."

"Immediately." I backed up, nearly sat on the bed, and then felt a new surge of adrenaline. "Immediately? So. Two weeks. In two weeks, I could be . . . dead."

Because that was the thing—the thing that had been hanging over my head the moment it became clear someone had planted enough evidence to frame me. People who killed queens didn't get sent to prison. They were *executed*. Few crimes among Moroi and dhampirs got that kind of punishment. We tried to be civilized in our justice, showing we were better than the bloodthirsty Strigoi. But certain crimes, in the eyes of the law, deserved death. Certain people deserved it, too—say, like, treasonous murderers. As the full impact of the future fell upon me, I felt myself shake and tears come dangerously close to spilling out of my eyes.

"That's not right!" I told Abe. "That's not right, and you know it!"

"Doesn't matter what I think," he said calmly. "I'm simply delivering the facts."

"Two weeks," I repeated. "What can we do in two weeks? I mean . . . you've got some lead, right? Or . . . or . . . you can find something by then? That's your specialty." I was rambling and knew I sounded hysterical and desperate. Of course, that was because I felt hysterical and desperate.

"It's going to be difficult to accomplish much," he explained. "The Court's preoccupied with the funeral and elections. Things are disorderly—which is both good and bad."

I knew about all the preparations from watching Lissa. I'd seen the chaos already brewing. Finding any sort of evidence in this mess wouldn't just be difficult. It could very well be impossible.

Two weeks. Two weeks, and I could be dead.

"I can't," I told Abe, my voice breaking. "I'm not . . . meant to die that way."

"Oh?" He arched an eyebrow. "You know how you're supposed to die?"

"In battle." One tear managed to escape, and I hastily wiped it away. I'd always lived my life with a tough image. I didn't want that shattering, not now when it mattered most of all. "In fighting. Defending those I love. Not . . . not through some planned execution."

"This is a fight of sorts," he mused. "Just not a physical one. Two weeks is

still two weeks. Is it bad? Yes. But it's better than one week. And nothing's impossible. Maybe new evidence will turn up. You simply have to wait and see."

"I hate waiting. This room . . . it's so small. I can't breathe. It'll kill me before any executioner does."

"I highly doubt it." Abe's expression was still cool, with no sign of sympathy. Tough love. "You've fearlessly fought groups of Strigoi, yet you can't handle a small room?"

"It's more than that! Now I have to wait each day in this hole, knowing there's a clock ticking down to my death and almost no way to stop it."

"Sometimes the greatest tests of our strength are situations that don't seem so obviously dangerous. Sometimes surviving is the hardest thing of all."

"Oh. No. *No*." I stalked away, pacing in small circles. "Do not start with all that noble crap. You sound like Dimitri when he used to give me his deep life lessons."

"He survived this very situation. He's surviving other things too."

Dimitri.

I took a deep breath, calming myself before I answered. Until this murder mess, Dimitri had been the biggest complication in my life. A year ago—though it seemed like eternity—he'd been my instructor in high school, training me to be one of the dhampir guardians who protect Moroi. He'd accomplished that—and a lot more. We'd fallen in love, something that wasn't allowed. We'd managed it as best we could, even finally coming up with a way for us to be together. That hope had disappeared when he'd been bitten and turned Strigoi. It had been a living nightmare for me. Then, through a miracle no one had believed possible, Lissa had used spirit to transform him back to a dhampir. But things unfortunately hadn't quite returned to how they'd been before the Strigoi attack.

I glared at Abe. "Dimitri survived this, but he was horribly depressed about it! He still is. About everything."

The full weight of the atrocities he'd committed as a Strigoi haunted Dimitri. He couldn't forgive himself and swore he could never love anyone now. The fact that I had begun dating Adrian didn't help matters. After a number of futile efforts, I'd accepted that Dimitri and I were through. I'd moved on, hoping I could have something real with Adrian now.

"Right," Abe said dryly. "He's depressed, but you're the picture of happiness and joy."

I sighed. "Sometimes talking to you is like talking to myself: pretty damned annoying. Is there any other reason you're here? Other than to deliver the terrible news? I would have been happier living in ignorance."

I'm not supposed to die this way. I'm not supposed to see it coming. My death is not some appointment penciled in on a calendar.

He shrugged. "I just wanted to see you. And your arrangements."

Yes, he had indeed, I realized. Abe's eyes had always come back to me as we spoke; there'd been no question I held his attention. There was nothing in our banter to concern my guards. But every so often, I'd see Abe's gaze flick around, taking in the hall, my cell, and whatever other details he found interesting. Abe had not earned his reputation as *zmey*—the serpent—for

nothing. He was always calculating, always looking for an advantage. It seemed my tendency toward crazy plots ran in the family.

"I also wanted to help you pass the time." He smiled and from under his arm, he handed me a couple of magazines and a book through the bars. "Maybe this will improve things."

I doubted any entertainment was going to make my two-week death countdown more manageable. The magazines were fashion and hair oriented. The book was *The Count of Monte Cristo*. I held it up, needing to make a joke, needing to do anything to make this less real.

"I saw the movie. Your subtle symbolism isn't really all that subtle. Unless you've hidden a file inside it."

"The book's always better than the movie." He started to turn away. "Maybe we'll have a literary discussion next time."

"Wait." I tossed the reading material onto the bed. "Before you go . . . in this whole mess, no one's ever brought up who actually did kill her." When Abe didn't answer right away, I gave him a sharp look. "You *do* believe I didn't do it, right?" For all I knew, he did think I was guilty and was just trying to help anyway. It wouldn't have been out of character.

"I believe my sweet daughter is capable of murder," he said at last. "But not this one."

"Then who did it?"

"That," he said before walking away, "is something I'm working on."

"But you just said we're running out of time! Abe!" I didn't want him to leave. I didn't want to be alone with my fear. "There's no way to fix this!"

"Just remember what I said in the courtroom," he called back.

He left my sight, and I sat back on the bed, thinking back to that day in court. At the end of the hearing, he'd told me—quite adamantly—that I wouldn't be executed. Or even go to trial. Abe Mazur wasn't one to make idle promises, but I was starting to think that even he had limits, especially since our timetable had just been adjusted.

I again took out the crumpled piece of paper and opened it. It too had come from the courtroom, covertly handed to me by Ambrose—Tatiana's servant and boy-toy.

Rose,

If you're reading this, then something terrible has happened. You probably hate me, and I don't blame you. I can only ask that you trust that what I did with the age decree was better for your people than what others had planned. There are some Moroi who want to force all *dhampirs into service, whether they want it or not, by using compulsion. The age decree has slowed that faction down.*

However, I write to you with a secret you must put right, and it is a secret you must share with as few as possible. Vasilisa needs her spot on the Council, and it can be done. She is not the last Dragomir. Another lives, the illegitimate child of Eric Dragomir. I know nothing else, but if you can find this son or daughter, you will give Vasilisa the power she deserves. No matter your faults and dangerous temperament, you are the only one I feel can take on this task. Waste no time in fulfilling it.

—Tatiana Ivashkov

The words hadn't changed since the other hundred times I'd read them, nor had the questions they always triggered. Was the note true? Had Tatiana really written it? Had she—in spite of her outwardly hostile attitude—trusted me with this dangerous knowledge? There were twelve royal families who made decisions for the Moroi, but for all intents and purposes, there might as well have only been eleven. Lissa was the last of her line, and without another member of the Dragomir family, Moroi law said she had no power to sit on and vote with the Council that made our decisions. Some pretty bad laws had already been made, and if the note was true, more would come. Lissa could fight those laws—and some people wouldn't like that, people who had already demonstrated their willingness to kill.

Another Dragomir.

Another Dragomir meant Lissa could vote. One more Council vote could change so much. It could change the Moroi world. It could change my world—say, like, whether I was found guilty or not. And certainly, it could change Lissa's world. All this time she'd believed she was alone. Yet . . . I uneasily wondered if she'd welcome a half-sibling. I accepted that my father was a scoundrel, but Lissa had always held hers up on a pedestal, believing the best of him. This news would come as a shock, and although I'd trained my entire life to keep her safe from physical threats, I was starting to think there were other things she needed to be protected from as well.

But first, *I* needed the truth. I had to know if this note had really come from Tatiana. I was pretty sure I could find out, but it involved something I hated doing.

Well, why not? It wasn't like I had anything else to do right now.

Rising from the bed, I turned my back to the bars and stared at the blank wall, using it as a focus point. Bracing myself, remembering that I was strong enough to keep control, I released the mental barriers I always subconsciously kept around my mind. A great pressure lifted from me, like air escaping a balloon.

And suddenly, I was surrounded by ghosts.

TWO

AS ALWAYS, IT WAS DISORIENTING. Faces and skulls, translucent and luminescent, all hovered around me. They were drawn to me, swarming in a cloud as though they all desperately needed to say something. And really, they probably did. The ghosts that lingered in this world were restless, souls who had reasons that kept them from moving on. When Lissa had brought me back from the dead, I'd kept a connection to their world. It had taken a lot of work and self-control to learn to block out the phantoms that followed me. The magical wards that protected the Moroi Court actually kept most ghosts away from me, but this time, I wanted them here. Giving them that access, drawing them in . . . well, it was a dangerous thing.

Something told me that if ever there was a restless spirit, it would be a queen who had been murdered in her own bed. I saw no familiar faces among this group but didn't give up hope.

"Tatiana," I murmured, focusing my thoughts on the dead queen's face. "Tatiana, come to me."

I had once been able to summon one ghost easily: my friend Mason, who'd been killed by Strigoi. While Tatiana and I weren't as close as Mason and I had been, we certainly had a connection. For a while, nothing happened. The same blur of faces swirled before me in the cell, and I began to despair. Then, all of a sudden, she was there.

She stood in the clothes she'd been murdered in, a long nightgown and robe covered in blood. Her colors were muted, flickering like a malfunctioning TV screen. Nonetheless, the crown on her head and regal stance gave her the same queenly air I remembered. Once she materialized, she said and did nothing. She simply stared at me, her dark gaze practically piercing my soul. A tangle of emotions tightened in my chest. That gut reaction I always got around Tatiana—anger and resentment—flared up. Then, it was muddled by a surprising wave of sympathy. No one's life should end the way hers had.

I hesitated, afraid the guards would hear me. Somehow, I had a feeling the volume of my voice didn't matter, and none of them could see what I saw. I held up the note.

"Did you write this?" I breathed. "Is it true?"

She continued to stare. Mason's ghost had behaved similarly. Summoning the dead was one thing; communicating with them was a whole other matter.

"I have to know. If there is another Dragomir, I'll find them." No point in drawing attention to the fact that I was in no position to find anything or

anyone. "But you have to tell me. Did you write this letter? Is it true?"

Only that maddening gaze answered me. My frustration grew, and the pressure of all those spirits began to give me a headache. Apparently, Tatiana was as annoying in death as she had been in life.

I was about to bring my walls back and push the ghosts away when Tatiana made the smallest of movements. It was a tiny nod, barely noticeable. Her hard eyes then shifted down to the note in my hand, and just like that—she was gone.

I slammed my barriers back up, using all my will to close myself off from the dead. The headache didn't disappear, but those faces did. I sank back on the bed and stared at the note without seeing it. There was my answer. The note was real. Tatiana had written it. Somehow, I doubted her ghost had any reason to lie.

Stretching out, I rested my head on the pillow and waited for that terrible throbbing to go away. I closed my eyes and used the spirit bond to return and see what Lissa had been doing. Since my arrest, she'd been busy pleading and arguing on my behalf, so I expected to find more of the same. Instead she was . . . dress shopping.

I was almost offended at my best friend's frivolity until I realized she was looking for a funeral dress. She was in one of the Court's tucked away stores, one that catered to royal families. To my surprise, Adrian was with her. Seeing his familiar, handsome face eased some of the fear in me. A quick probe of her mind told me why he was here: she'd talked him into coming because she didn't want him left alone.

I could understand why. He was completely drunk. It was a wonder he could stand, and in fact, I strongly suspected the wall he leaned against was all that held him up. His brown hair was a mess—and not in the purposeful way he usually styled it. His deep green eyes were bloodshot. Like Lissa, Adrian was a spirit user. He had an ability she didn't yet: he could visit people's dreams. I'd expected him to come to me since my imprisonment, and now it made sense why he hadn't. Alcohol stunted spirit. In some ways, that was a good thing. Excessive spirit created a darkness that drove its users insane. But spending life perpetually drunk wasn't all that healthy either.

Seeing him through Lissa's eyes triggered emotional confusion nearly as intense as what I'd experienced with Tatiana. I felt bad for him. He was obviously worried and upset about me, and the startling events this last week had blindsided him as much as the rest of us. He'd also lost his aunt whom, despite her brusque attitude, he'd cared for.

Yet, in spite of all this, I felt . . . scorn. That was unfair, perhaps, but I couldn't help it. I cared about him so much and understood him being upset, but there were better ways of dealing with his loss. His behavior was almost cowardly. He was hiding from his problems in a bottle, something that went against every piece of my nature. Me? I couldn't let my problems win without a fight.

"Velvet," the shopkeeper told Lissa with certainty. The wizened Moroi woman held up a voluminous, long-sleeved gown. "Velvet is traditional in the royal escort."

Along with the rest of the fanfare, Tatiana's funeral would have a

ceremonial escort walking alongside the coffin, with a representative from each family there. Apparently, no one minded that Lissa fill that role for her family. But voting? That was another matter.

Lissa eyed the dress. It looked more like a Halloween costume than a funeral gown. "It's ninety degrees out," said Lissa. "And humid."

"Tradition demands sacrifice," the woman said melodramatically. "As does tragedy."

Adrian opened his mouth, undoubtedly ready with some inappropriate and mocking comment. Lissa gave him a sharp headshake that kept him quiet. "Aren't there any, I don't know, sleeveless options?"

The saleswoman's eyes widened. "No one has ever worn straps to a royal funeral. It wouldn't be right."

"What about shorts?" asked Adrian. "Are they okay if they're with a tie? Because that's what I was gonna go with."

The woman looked horrified. Lissa shot Adrian a look of disdain, not so much because of the remark—which she found mildly amusing—but because she too was disgusted by his constant state of intoxication.

"Well, no one treats me like a full-fledged royal," said Lissa, turning back to the dresses. "No reason to act like one now. Show me your straps and short-sleeves."

The saleswoman grimaced but complied. She had no problem advising royals on fashion but wouldn't dare order them to do or wear anything. It was part of the class stratification of our world. The woman walked across the store to find the requested dresses, just as Lissa's boyfriend and his aunt entered the shop.

Christian Ozera, I thought, was who Adrian should have been acting like. The fact that I could even think like that was startling. Times had certainly changed from when I held Christian up as a role model. But it was true. I'd watched him with Lissa this last week, and Christian had been determined and steadfast, doing whatever he could to help her in the wake of Tatiana's death and my arrest. From the look on his face now, it was obvious he had something important to relay.

His outspoken aunt, Tasha Ozera, was another study in strength and grace under pressure. She'd raised him after his parents had turned Strigoi—and had attacked her, leaving Tasha with scarring on one side of her face. Moroi had always relied on guardians for defense, but after that attack, Tasha had decided to take matters into her own hands. She'd learned to fight, training with all sorts of hand-to-hand methods and weapons. She was really quite a badass and constantly pushed for other Moroi to learn combat too.

Lissa let go of a dress she'd been examining and turned to Christian eagerly. After me, there was no one else she trusted more in the world. He'd been her rock throughout all of this.

He looked around the store, not appearing overly thrilled to be surrounded by dresses. "You guys are shopping?" he asked, glancing from Lissa to Adrian. "Getting in a little girl time?"

"Hey, you'd benefit from a wardrobe change," said Adrian. "Besides, I bet you'd look great in a halter top."

Lissa ignored the guys' banter and focused on the Ozeras. "What did you

find out?"

"They've decided not to take action," said Christian. His lips curled in disdain. "Well, not any punishment kind of action."

Tasha nodded. "We're trying to push the idea that he just thought Rose was in danger and jumped in before he realized what was actually happening."

My heart stopped. Dimitri. They were talking about Dimitri.

For a moment, I was no longer with Lissa. I was no longer in my cell. Instead, I was back to the day of my arrest. I'd been arguing with Dimitri in a café, scolding him for his continued refusal to talk to me, let alone continue our former relationship. I'd decided then that I was done with him, that things were truly over and that I wouldn't let him keep tearing my heart apart. That was when the guardians had come for me, and no matter what Dimitri claimed about his Strigoi-time making him unable to love, he had reacted with lightning speed in my defense. We'd been hopelessly outnumbered, but he hadn't cared. The look on his face—and my own uncanny understanding of him—had told me all I needed to know. I was facing a threat. He had to defend me.

And defend me he had. He'd fought like the god he'd been back at St. Vladimir's Academy, when he'd taught me how to battle Strigoi. He incapacitated more guardians in that café than one man should have been able to. The only thing that had ended it—and I truly believe he would have fought until his last breath—had been my intervention. I hadn't known at the time what was going on or why a legion of guardians would want to arrest me. But I had realized that Dimitri was in serious danger of harming his already fragile status around Court. A Strigoi being restored was unheard of, and many still didn't trust him. I'd begged Dimitri to stop, more afraid of what would happen to him than me. Little had I known what was in store for me.

He'd come to my hearing—under guard—but neither Lissa nor I had seen him since. Lissa had been working hard to clear him of any wrongdoing, fearing they'd lock him up again. And me? I'd been trying to tell myself not to over-think what he had done. My arrest and potential execution took precedence. Yet . . . I still wondered. Why had he done it? Why had he risked his life for mine? Was it an instinctive reaction to a threat? Had he done it as a favor to Lissa, whom he'd sworn to help in return for freeing him? Or had he truly done it because he still had feelings for me?

I still didn't know the answer, but seeing him like that, like the fierce Dimitri from my past, had stirred up the feelings I was so desperately trying to get over. I kept trying to assure myself that recovering from a relationship took time. Lingering feelings were natural. Unfortunately, it took longer to get over a guy when he threw himself into danger for you.

Regardless, Christian and Tasha's words gave me hope about Dimitri's fate. After all, I wasn't the only one walking a tenuous line between life and death. Those convinced Dimitri was still Strigoi wanted to see a stake through his heart.

"They're keeping him confined again," said Christian. "But not in a cell. Just in his room, with a couple of guards. They don't want him out around Court until things settle down."

"That's better than jail," admitted Lissa.

"It's still absurd," snapped Tasha, more to herself than the others. She and Dimitri had been close over the years, and she'd once wanted to take that relationship to another level. She'd settled for friendship, and her outrage over the injustice done to him was as strong as ours. "They should have let him go as soon as he became a dhampir again. Once the elections are settled, I'm going to make sure he's free."

"And that's what's weird . . ." Christian's pale blue eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "We heard that Tatiana had told others before she—before she —" Christian hesitated and glanced uneasily at Adrian. The pause was uncharacteristic for Christian, who usually spoke his mind abruptly.

"Before she was murdered," said Adrian flatly, not looking at any of them. "Go on."

Christian swallowed. "Um, yeah. I guess—not in public—she'd announced that she believed Dimitri really was a dhampir again. Her plan was to help him get more acceptance once the other stuff settled down." The "other stuff" was the age law mentioned in Tatiana's note, the one saying dhampirs turning sixteen would be forced to graduate and start defending Moroi. It had infuriated me, but like so many other things now . . . well, it was kind of on hold.

Adrian made a strange sound, like he was clearing his throat. "She did not."

Christian shrugged. "Lots of her advisors said she did. That's the rumor."

"I have a hard time believing it too," Tasha told Adrian. She'd never approved of Tatiana's policies and had vehemently spoken out against them on more than one occasion. Adrian's disbelief wasn't political, though. His was simply coming from ideas he'd always had about his aunt. She'd never given any indication that she wanted to help Dimitri regain his old status.

Adrian made no further comment, but I knew this topic was kindling sparks of jealousy within him. I'd told him Dimitri was in the past and that I was ready to move on, but Adrian—like me—must have undoubtedly wondered about the motivations behind Dimitri's gallant defense.

Lissa began to speculate on how they might get Dimitri out of house arrest when the saleswoman returned with an armful of dresses she clearly disapproved of. Biting her lip, Lissa fell silent. She filed away Dimitri's situation as something to deal with later. Instead, she wearily prepared to try on clothes and play the part of a good little royal girl.

Adrian perked up at the sight of the dresses. "Any halters in there?"

I returned to my cell, mulling over the problems that just seemed to keep piling up. I was worried about both Adrian and Dimitri. I was worried about myself. I was also worried about this so-called lost Dragomir. I was starting to believe the story could be real, but there was nothing I could do about it, which frustrated me. I needed to take action when it came to helping Lissa. Tatiana had told me in her letter to be careful whom I spoke to about the matter. Should I pass this mission on to someone else? I wanted to take charge of it, but the bars and suffocating walls around me said I might not be able to take charge of anything for a while, not even my own life.

Two weeks.

Needing further distraction, I gave in and began reading Abe's book, which was exactly the tale of wrongful imprisonment I'd expected it to be. It *was*

pretty good and taught me that faking my own death apparently wouldn't work as an escape method. The book unexpectedly stirred up old memories. A chill went down my spine as I recalled a Tarot reading that a Moroi named Rhonda had given to me. She was Ambrose's aunt, and one of the cards she'd drawn for me had shown a woman tied to swords. *Wrongful imprisonment. Accusations. Slander*. Damn. I was really starting to hate those cards. I always insisted they were a scam, yet they had an annoying tendency to come true. The end of her reading had shown a journey, but to where? A real prison? My execution?

Questions with no answers. Welcome to my world. Out of options for now, I figured I might as well try to get some rest. Stretching out on the pallet, I tried to push away those constant worries. Not easy. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw a judge banging a gavel, condemning me to death. I saw my name in the history books, not as a hero, but as a traitor.

Lying there, choking on my own fear, I thought of Dimitri. I pictured his steady gaze and could practically hear him lecturing me. *Don't worry now about what you can't change. Rest when you can so you'll be ready for tomorrow's battles.* The imaginary advice calmed me. Sleep came at last, heavy and deep. I'd tossed and turned a lot this week, so true rest was welcome.

Then—I woke up.

I sat upright in bed, my heart pounding. Peering around, I looked for danger—any threat that might have startled me out of that sleep. There was nothing. Darkness. Silence. The faint squeak of a chair down the hall told me my guards were still around.

The bond, I realized. The bond had woken me up. I'd felt a sharp, intense flare of . . . what? Intensity. Anxiety. A rush of adrenaline. Panic raced through me, and I dove deeper into Lissa, trying to find what had caused that surge of emotion from her.

What I found was . . . nothing.

The bond was gone.

THREE

WELL, NOT GONE EXACTLY.

Muted. Kind of like how it had felt immediately after she'd restored Dimitri back to a dhampir. The magic had been so strong then that it had "burned out" our link. There was no blast of magic now. It was almost as though the blankness was intentional on her part. Like always, I still had a sense of Lissa: she was alive; she was well. So what was keeping me from feeling more of her? She wasn't asleep, because I could feel a sense of alert consciousness on the other side of this wall. Spirit was there, hiding her from me . . . and she was making it happen.

What the hell? It was an accepted fact that our bond worked only one way. I could sense her; she couldn't sense me. Likewise, I could control when I went into her mind. Often, I tried to keep myself out (jail captivity time excluded), in an attempt to protect her privacy. Lissa had no such control, and her vulnerability infuriated her sometimes. Every once in a while, she could use her power to shield herself from me, but it was rare, difficult, and required considerable effort on her part. Today, she was pulling it off, and as the condition persisted, I could feel her strain. Keeping me out wasn't easy, but she was managing it. Of course, I didn't care about the how of it. I wanted to know the *why*.

It was probably my worst day of imprisonment. Fear for myself was one thing. But for her? That was agonizing. If it was my life or hers, I would have walked into execution without hesitation. I had to know what was going on. Had she learned something? Had the Council decided to skip right over a trial and execute me? Was Lissa trying to protect me from that news? The more spirit she wielded, the more she endangered her life. This mental wall required a lot of magic. But why? Why was she taking this risk?

It was astonishing in that moment to realize just how much I relied on the bond to keep track of her. True: I didn't always welcome someone else's thoughts in my head. Despite the control I'd learned, her mind still sometimes poured into mine in moments I'd rather not experience. None of that was a concern now—only her safety was. Being blocked off was like having a limb removed.

All day I tried to get inside her head. Every time, I was kept out. It was maddening. No visitors came to me either, and the book and magazines had long since lost their appeal. The caged animal feeling was getting to me again, and I spent a fair amount of time yelling at my guards—with no results.

Tatiana's funeral was tomorrow, and the clock to my trial was ticking loudly.

Bedtime came, and the wall in the bond dropped at last—because Lissa went to sleep. The link between us was firm, but her mind was closed off in unconsciousness. I'd find no answers there. Left with nothing else, I went to bed as well, wondering if I'd be cut off again in the morning.

I wasn't. She and I were linked again, and I was able to see the world through her eyes once more. Lissa was up and around early, preparing for the funeral. I neither saw nor felt any sign of why I'd been blocked the day before. She was letting me back into her mind, just like normal. I almost wondered if I'd imagined being cut off from her.

No . . . there it was. Barely. Within her mind, I sensed thoughts she was still hiding from me. They were slippery. Each time I tried to grasp them, they fell out of my hands. I was amazed she could still use enough magic to pull it off, and it was also a clear indication that she'd blocked me out intentionally yesterday. What was going on? Why on earth would she need to hide something from me? What could I do about anything, locked in this hellhole? Again, my unease grew. What awful thing didn't I know about?

I watched Lissa get ready, seeing no ostensible sign of anything unusual. The dress she'd ended up selecting had cap sleeves and went to the knee. Black, of course. It was hardly a clubbing dress, but she knew it would raise some eyebrows. Under different circumstances, this would have delighted me. She chose to wear her hair down and unbound, its pale blond color showing brightly against the dress's black when she surveyed herself in a mirror.

Christian met Lissa outside. He cleaned up well, I had to admit, uncharacteristically wearing a dress shirt and tie. He'd drawn the line at a jacket, and his expression was an odd mix of nervousness, secrecy, and typical snark. When he saw Lissa, though, his face momentarily transformed, turning radiant and awestruck as he gazed at her. He gave her a small smile and took her into his arms for a brief embrace. His touch brought her contentment and comfort, easing her anxiety. They'd gotten back together recently after a breakup, and that time apart had been agonizing for both of them.

"It's going to be okay," he murmured, his look of worry returning. "This'll work. We can do this."

She said nothing but tightened her hold on him before stepping back. Neither of them spoke as they walked to the beginning of the funeral procession. I decided this was suspicious. She caught hold of his hand and felt strengthened by it.

The funeral procedures for Moroi monarchs had been the same for centuries, no matter if the Court was in Romania or its new home in Pennsylvania. That was the Moroi way. They mixed the traditional with the modern, magic with technology.

The queen's coffin would be carried by pallbearers out of the palace and taken with great ceremony all through the Court's grounds, until it reached the Court's imposing cathedral. There, a select group would enter for mass. After the service, Tatiana would be buried in the church's graveyard, taking her place beside other monarchs and important royals.

The coffin's route was easy to spot. Poles strung with red and black silk banners marked each side. Rose petals had been strewn on the ground the coffin would pass over. Along the sides, people crammed together, hoping to catch a glimpse of their former queen. Many Moroi had come from far off places, some to see the funeral and some to see the monarch elections that would soon follow over the next couple of weeks.

The royal family escort—most of whom wore saleswoman-approved black velvet—were already heading into the palace building. Lissa stopped outside to part ways with Christian since he certainly had never been in the running to represent his family for such an honored event. She gave him another fierce hug and a light kiss. As they stepped away, there was a knowing glint in his blue eyes—that secret that was hidden from me.

Lissa pushed through the gathering crowds, trying to get to the entrance and find the procession's starting point. The building didn't look like the palaces or castles of ancient Europe. Its grand stone façade and tall windows matched the Court's other structures, but a few features—its height, wide marble steps—subtly distinguished it from other buildings. A tug at Lissa's arm stopped her progress, nearly causing her to run into an ancient Moroi man.

"Vasilisa?" It was Daniella Ivashkov, Adrian's mother. Daniella wasn't so bad as royals went, and she was actually okay with Adrian and me dating—or at least, she had been before I became an accused murderer. Most of Daniella's acceptance had come from the fact that she believed Adrian and I would split up anyways once I received my guardian assignment. Daniella had also convinced one of her cousins, Damon Tarus, to be my lawyer—an offer I'd rejected when I chose Abe to represent me instead. I still wasn't entirely sure if I'd made the best decision there, but it probably tarnished Daniella's view of me, which I regretted.

Lissa offered up a nervous smile. She was anxious to join the procession and get all of this over with. "Hi," she said.

Daniella was dressed in full black velvet and even had small diamond barrettes shining in her dark hair. Worry and agitation lined her pretty face. "Have you seen Adrian? I haven't been able to find him anywhere. We checked his room."

"Oh." Lissa averted her eyes.

"What?" Daniella nearly shook her. "What do you know?"

Lissa sighed. "I'm not sure where he is, but I saw him last night when he was coming back from some party." Lissa hesitated, like she was too embarrassed to tell the rest. "He was . . . really drunk. More than I've ever seen him. He was going off with some girls, and I don't know. I'm sorry, Lady Ivashkov. He's probably . . . well, passed out somewhere."

Daniella wrung her hands, and I shared her dismay. "I hope nobody notices. Maybe we can say . . . he was overcome with grief. There's so much going on. Surely no one will notice. You'll tell them, right? You'll say how upset he was?"

I liked Daniella, but this royal obsession with image was really starting to bug me. I knew she loved her son, but her main concern here seemed to be less about Tatiana's final rest than it was about what others would think about a breach of protocol. "Of course," said Lissa. "I wouldn't want anyone to . . .

well, I'd hate for that to get out."

"Thank you. Now go." Daniella gestured to the doors, still looking anxious. "You need to take your place." To Lissa's surprise, Daniella gave her a gentle pat on the arm. "And don't be nervous. You'll do fine. Just keep your head up."

Guardians stationed at the door recognized Lissa as someone with access and allowed her in. There, in the foyer, was Tatiana's coffin. Lissa froze, suddenly overwhelmed, and nearly forgot what she was doing there.

The coffin alone was a work of art. It was made of gleaming black wood, polished to brilliance. Paintings of elaborate garden scenes in shining metallic colors of every hue adorned each side. Gold glittered everywhere, including the poles that the pallbearers would hold. Those poles were draped with strings of mauve roses. It seemed like the thorns and leaves would make it difficult for the pallbearers to get a good grip, but that was their problem to deal with.

Inside, uncovered and lying on a bed of more mauve roses, was Tatiana herself. It was strange. I saw dead bodies all the time. Hell, I created them. But seeing a body that had been preserved, lying peacefully and ornamentally . . . well, it was creepy. It was strange for Lissa, too, particularly since she didn't have to deal with death as often as I did.

Tatiana wore a gleaming silk gown that was a rich shade of purple—the traditional color for royal burial. The dress's long sleeves were decorated with an elaborate design of small pearls. I'd often seen Tatiana in red—a color associated with the Ivashkov family—and I was glad for the purple burial tradition. A red dress would have been too strong a reminder of the bloody pictures of her that I'd seen at my hearing, pictures I kept trying to block out. Strings of gemstones and more pearls hung around her neck, and a gold crown set with diamonds and amethysts rested upon her graying hair. Someone had done a good job with Tatiana's makeup, but even they couldn't hide the whiteness of her skin. Moroi were naturally pale. In death, they were like chalk—like Strigoi. The image struck Lissa so vividly that she swayed on her feet a little and had to look away. The roses' scent filled the air, but there was a hint of decay mixed in with that sweetness.

The funeral coordinator spotted Lissa and ordered her into position—after first bemoaning Lissa's fashion choice. The sharp words snapped Lissa back to reality, and she fell in line with five other royals on the right side of the coffin. She tried not to look too closely at the queen's body and directed her gaze elsewhere. The pallbearers soon showed up and lifted their burden, using the rose-draped poles to rest the coffin on their shoulders and slowly carry it out to the waiting crowd. The pallbearers were all dhampirs. They wore formal suits, which confused me at first, but then I realized they were all Court guardians—except one. Ambrose. He looked as gorgeous as always and stared straight ahead as he did his job, face blank and expressionless.

I wondered if Ambrose mourned Tatiana. I was so fixated on my own problems that I kept forgetting a life had been lost here, a life that many had loved. Ambrose had defended Tatiana when I'd been angry about the age law. Watching him through Lissa's eyes, I wished I was there to speak to him in person. He had to know something more about the letter he'd slipped me in the courtroom. Surely he wasn't just the delivery boy.

The procession moved forward, ending my musings about Ambrose. Before and ahead of the coffin were other ceremonial people. Royals in elaborate clothing, making a glittering display. Uniformed guardians carrying banners. Musicians with flutes walked at the very back, playing a mournful tune. For her part, Lissa was very good at public appearances and managed the slow, stately pace with elegance and grace, her gaze level and confident. I couldn't see outside her body, of course, but it was easy to imagine what the spectators saw. She was beautiful and regal, worthy to inherit the Dragomir legacy, and hopefully more and more would realize that. It would save us a lot of trouble if someone would change the voting law through standard procedures, so we didn't have to rely on a quest for a lost sibling.

Walking the funeral route took a long time. Even when the sun started sinking down toward the horizon, the day's heat still hung in the air. Lissa began to sweat but knew her discomfort was nothing compared to the pallbearers'. If the watching crowd felt the heat, they didn't show it. They craned their necks to get their one glimpse of the spectacle passing before them. Lissa didn't process the onlookers so much, but in their faces, I saw that the coffin wasn't their only focus. They were also watching Lissa. Word of what she'd done for Dimitri had blazed around the Moroi world, and while many were skeptical of her ability to heal, there were just as many who believed. I saw expressions of wonder and awe in the crowd, and for a second, I wondered who they'd *really* come to see: Lissa or Tatiana?

Finally, the cathedral came into view, which was good news for Lissa. The sun didn't kill Moroi like it did Strigoi, but the heat and sunlight were still uncomfortable for any vampire. The procession was nearly finished, and she, being one of those allowed into the church service, would soon get to enjoy air conditioning.

As I studied the surroundings, I couldn't help but think what a circle of irony my life was. Off to the sides of the church's extensive grounds were two giant statues showing ancient Moroi monarchs of legend, a king and queen who had helped the Moroi prosper. Even though they were a fair distance from the church, the statues loomed ominously, like they were scrutinizing everything. Near the queen's statue was a garden that I knew well. I'd been forced to landscape it as punishment for running off to Las Vegas. My true purpose on that trip—which no one knew—had been to free Victor Dashkov from prison. Victor had been a longtime enemy of ours, but he and his brother Robert, a spirit user, had held the knowledge we needed to save Dimitri. If any guardians had found out that I'd freed Victor—then later lost him—my punishment would have been a lot worse than filing and landscaping. At least I'd done a good job with the garden, I thought bitterly. If I was executed, I'd leave a lasting mark at Court.

Lissa's eyes lingered on one of the statues for a long time before she turned back to the church. She was sweating heavily now, and I realized some of it wasn't just the heat. She was anxious too. But why? Why was she so nervous? This was just ceremony. All she had to do was go through the motions here. Yet . . . there it was again. Something else was bothering her. She was still keeping a cluster of thoughts from me, but a few leaked out as she worried.

Too close, too close. We're moving too fast.

Fast? Not by my estimation. I could have never handled this slow, stately pace. I felt especially bad for the pallbearers. If I were one, I would've said to hell with propriety and started jogging toward my final destination. Of course, that might jostle the body. If the funeral coordinator had been upset over Lissa's dress, there was no telling how she'd react if Tatiana fell out of the coffin.

Our view of the cathedral was getting clearer, its domes shining amber and orange in the setting sun. Lissa was still several yards away, but the priest standing out front was clearly visible. His robes were almost blinding. They were made of heavy, glittering gold brocade, long and full. A rounded hat with a cross, also gold, sat on his head. I thought it was in poor taste for him to outshine the queen's clothing, but maybe that was just what priests did on formal occasions. Maybe it got God's attention. He lifted his arms in welcome, showing off more of that rich fabric. The rest of the crowd and I couldn't help but stare at the dazzling display.

So, you can imagine our surprise when the statues blew up.

FOUR

AND WHEN I SAY THEY blew up, I mean *they blew up.*

Flames and smoke unfurled like petals from a newly opened flower as those poor monarchs exploded into pieces of rock. For a moment, I was stunned. It was like watching an action movie, the explosion cracking the air and shaking the ground. Then, guardian training kicked in. Critical observation and calculation took over. I immediately noticed that the bulk of the statue's material blew toward the outer sides of the garden. Small stone pieces and dust rained down on the funeral procession, but no large chunks of rock hit Lissa or anyone standing nearby. Assuming the statues had not spontaneously combusted, whoever had blown them up had done so in a precise way.

The logistics aside, huge billowing pillars of flame are still pretty scary. Chaos broke loose as everyone tried to get away. Only, they all took different routes, so collisions and entanglements occurred. Even the pallbearers set down their precious burden and took off. Ambrose was the last to do so, his mouth agape and eyes wide as he stared at Tatiana, but another look at the statues sent him off into the mob. A few guardians tried to keep order, herding people back down the funeral path, but it didn't do a lot of good. Everyone was out for themselves, too terrified and panicked to think reasonably.

Well, everyone except for Lissa.

To my surprise, she *wasn't* surprised.

She had been expecting the explosion.

She didn't run right away, despite people pushing past and shoving her aside. She stood rooted where she'd been when the statues blew up, studying them and the wreckage they'd caused. In particular, she seemed concerned about anyone in the crowd who might have been hurt by the blasts. But, no. As I'd already observed, there seemed to be no injuries. And if there were, it was going to be because of the stampede.

Satisfied, Lissa turned and began walking away with the others. (Well, she was walking; they were running). She'd only gone a little distance when she saw a huge group of guardians hurrying *toward* the church, faces grim. Some of them stopped to aid those escaping the destruction, but most of the guardians were on their way to the blast site to see what had happened.

Lissa paused again, causing the guy behind her to slam into her back, but she barely felt the impact. She intently watched the guardians, taking note of how many there were, and then moved on once more. Her hidden thoughts were starting to unravel. Finally, I began to see pieces of the plan she'd kept

hidden from me. She was pleased. Nervous, too. But overall, she felt—

A commotion back at the jail snapped me into my own mind. The usual quiet of the holding area had shattered and was now filled with grunts and exclamations. I leapt up from where I'd been sitting and pressed against the bars, straining to see what was happening. Was this building about to explode too? My cell only faced a wall in the hallway, with no view of the rest of the corridor or its entrance. I did, however, see the guardians who usually stood at the hall's far end come tearing past me, toward whatever altercation was occurring.

I didn't know what this meant for me and braced for anything, friend or foe. For all I knew, there could be some political fringe group launching attacks on the Court to make a statement against the Moroi government. Peering around the cell, I swore silently, wishing I had anything to defend myself. The closest I had was Abe's book, which was no good at all. If he was the badass he pretended to be, he really would have slipped a file into it. Or gotten me something bigger, like *War and Peace*.

The scuffling died down and footsteps thundered toward me. Clenching my fists, I took a few steps back, ready to defend myself against anyone.

"Anyone" turned out to be Eddie Castile. And Mikhail Tanner.

Friendly faces were *not* what I had expected. Eddie was a longtime friend from St. Vladimir's, another new guardian like me and someone who'd stuck by me through a lot of misadventures, including the Victor Dashkov prison break. Mikhail was older than us, mid-twenties, and had helped us restore Dimitri in the hopes that Sonya Karp—a woman Mikhail had loved who had turned Strigoi—might be saved as well. I glanced back and forth between the two guys' faces.

"What's going on?" I demanded.

"Nice to see you too," said Eddie. He was sweating and keyed up with battle fervor, a few purple marks on his face showing he'd met someone's fist tonight. In his hand was a weapon I'd seen in the guardians' arsenal: a baton-type thing used to incapacitate people without killing them. But Mikhail held something much more valuable: the keycard and mechanical key to open my cell.

My friends were staging a prison break. Unbelievable. Crazy was usually *my* specialty.

"Did you guys . . ." I frowned. The thought of escape filled me with joy, but the logistics were sobering. Clearly, they'd been responsible for the fight with my guards that I'd just heard. Getting down here in the first place wasn't that easy either. "Did you two just take on every guardian in this building?"

Mikhail finished unlocking the door, and I didn't waste any time in hurrying out. After feeling so oppressed and smothered for days, it was like stepping onto a mountain ledge, wind and space all around me.

"Rose, there are no guardians in this building. Well, maybe one. And these guys." Eddie gestured in the direction of the earlier fight, where I assumed my guards lay unconscious. Surely my friends hadn't killed anyone.

"The rest of the guardians are all checking out the explosion," I realized. Pieces began coming together—including Lissa's lack of surprise over the commotion. "Oh no. You had Christian blow up ancient Moroi artifacts."

"Of course not," said Eddie. He seemed shocked that I would have suggested such an atrocity. "Other fire users would be able to tell if he did."

"Well, that's something," I said. I should have had more faith in their sanity.

Or maybe not.

"We used C4," explained Mikhail.

"Where on earth did you—"

My tongue locked up when I saw who was standing at the end of the hallway. Dimitri.

Not knowing how he was during my imprisonment had been frustrating. Christian and Tasha's report had been only a tease. Well, here was the answer. Dimitri stood near the hall's entrance in all his six-foot-seven glory, as imperious and intimidating as any god. His sharp brown eyes assessed everything in an instant, and his strong, lean body was tensed and ready for any threat. The look on his face was so focused, so filled with passion, that I couldn't believe anyone ever could have thought he was a Strigoi. Dimitri burned with life and energy. In fact, looking at him now, I was again reminded of how he'd stood up for me at my arrest. He wore that same expression. Really, it was the same one I'd seen countless times. It was the one people feared and admired. It was the one I had loved.

"You're here too?" I tried reminding myself that my muddled romantic history wasn't the most important thing in the world for a change. "Aren't you under house arrest?"

"He escaped," said Eddie slyly. I caught the real meaning: he and Mikhail had *helped* Dimitri escape. "It's what people would expect some violent probably-still-a-Strigoi guy to do, right?"

"You'd also expect him to come bust you out," added Mikhail, playing along with the game. "Especially considering how he fought for you last week. Really, everyone is going to think he busted you out *alone*. Not with us."

Dimitri said nothing. His eyes, while still carefully watching our surroundings, were also assessing me. He was making sure I was okay and uninjured. He looked relieved that I was.

"Come on," Dimitri finally said. "We don't have much time." That was an understatement, but there was one thing bugging me about my friends' "brilliant" plan.

"There's no way they'll think *he* did it alone!" I exclaimed, realizing what Mikhail was getting at. They were setting Dimitri up as the culprit in this escape. I gestured to the unconscious guardians at our feet. "They saw your faces."

"Not really," a new voice said. "Not after a little spirit-induced amnesia. By the time they wake up, the only person they'll remember seeing will be that unstable Russian guy. No offense."

"None taken," said Dimitri, as Adrian stepped through the doorway.

I stared, trying not to gape. There they were together, the two men in my life. Adrian hardly looked like he could jump into a fistfight, but he was as alert and serious as the other fighters here. His lovely eyes were clear and full of the cunning I knew they could possess when he really tried. That's when it hit me: he showed no sign of intoxication whatsoever. Had what I'd seen the other day been a ruse? Or had he forced himself to take control? Either way, I

felt a slow grin creeping over my face.

"Lissa lied to your mom earlier," I said. "You're supposed to be passed out drunk somewhere."

He rewarded me with one of his cynical smiles. "Well, yes, that would probably be the smarter—and more enjoyable—thing to be doing right now. And hopefully, that's what everyone thinks I'm doing."

"We need to go," said Dimitri, growing agitated.

We turned toward him. Our jokes vanished. That attitude I'd noticed about Dimitri, the one that said he could do anything and would always lead you to victory, made people want to follow him unconditionally. The expressions on Mikhail and Eddie's faces—as they grew serious—showed that was exactly how they felt. It seemed natural to me too. Even Adrian looked like he believed in Dimitri, and in that moment, I admired Adrian for putting aside any jealousy—and also for risking himself like this. Especially since Adrian had made it clear on more than one occasion he didn't want to be involved with any dangerous adventures or use his spirit in a covert way. In Las Vegas, for example, he'd simply accompanied us in an observer's role. Of course, he'd also been drunk most of the time, but that probably made no difference.

I took a few steps forward, but Adrian suddenly held out a hand to stop me. "Wait—before you go with us, you need to know something." Dimitri started to protest, eyes glinting with impatience. "She *does*," argued Adrian, meeting Dimitri's gaze squarely. "Rose, if you escape . . . you're more or less confirming your guilt. You'll be a fugitive. If the guardians find you, they aren't going to need a trial or sentence to kill you on sight."

Four sets of eyes rested on me as the full meaning sank in. If I ran now and was caught, I was dead for sure. If I stayed, I had the slim chance that in my short time before trial, we might find evidence to save me. It wasn't impossible. But if nothing turned up, I was also most certainly dead. Either option was a gamble. Either one had the strong possibility of me not surviving.

Adrian looked as conflicted as I felt. We both knew I didn't have any good choices. He was simply worried and wanted me to know what I was risking. Dimitri, however . . . for him, there was no debate. I could see it all over his face. He was an advocate of rules and doing the proper thing. But in this case? With such bad odds? It was better to risk living as a fugitive, and if death came, better to face it fighting.

My death will not be penciled in on someone's calendar.

"Let's go," I said.

We hurried out of the building, anxious to get moving with the plan. I couldn't help but comment to Adrian, "You've got to be using a lot of spirit to pull off all those illusions on the guards."

"I am," he agreed. "And I don't really have the power to do it for very long. Lissa could probably make a dozen guardians think they'd seen ghosts. Me? I can barely make a few forget Eddie and Mikhail. That's why there had to be someone they remembered to attract the attention, and Dimitri's the ideal scapegoat."

"Well, thank you." I gave his hand a gentle squeeze. As warmth flowed between us, I didn't bother telling him I was a long way from being free yet. It

would diminish his heroics. We had a lot of obstacles ahead, but I still appreciated him stepping up like this and respecting my decision to go along with the escape plan.

Adrian shot me a sidelong glance. "Yeah, well, I'm supposed to be crazy, right?" A flash of affection shone in his eyes. "And there isn't much I wouldn't do for you. The stupider, the better."

We emerged to the main floor, and I saw that Eddie had been right about guardian security. The halls and rooms were virtually deserted. Without a second glance, we hurried outdoors, and the fresh air seemed to renew my energy.

"Now what?" I asked my rescuers.

"Now we take you to the getaway car," said Eddie.

The garages weren't far, but they weren't close either. "That's a lot of open ground to cover," I said. I didn't bring up the obvious problem: me being killed if spotted.

"I'm using spirit to keep us all vague and nondescript," said Adrian. More testing of his magic. He couldn't handle much more. "People won't recognize us unless they stop and stare directly at us."

"Which they probably won't," said Mikhail. "If anyone even notices us at all. Everyone's too worried about themselves to pay much attention to others in all this chaos."

Looking around outside, I could see he was right. The jail building was far from the church, but by now, people who'd been near the blast had made their way to this part of Court. Some were running into their residences. Some were seeking guardians, hoping for protection. And some . . . some were going the same direction we were, toward the garages.

"People are freaked out enough to actually try to leave Court," I realized. Our group was moving as fast as we could with Adrian, who wasn't in the shame shape as dhampirs. "The garages will be crowded." Both official Court vehicles and visiting guests parked in the same area.

"That could help us," said Mikhail. "More chaos."

With so many distractions in my own reality, I couldn't plunge completely into Lissa's. A light brush of the bond found her safe, over in the palace.

"What's Lissa doing during all of this?" I asked.

Believe me, I was glad she wasn't involved with this busting-me-out-of-jail madness. But, as Adrian had noted, her ability with spirit could have gone much farther than his here. And now, looking back on it all, it was obvious she had known about this plan. That had been her secret.

"Lissa needs to stay innocent. She can't be linked to any part of the escape or explosion," replied Dimitri, eyes fixed ahead on his goal. His tone was firm. He still regarded her as his savior. "She has to keep herself visible with the other royals. So does Christian." He almost smiled. Almost. "Those two would certainly be my first suspects if something exploded."

"But the guardians won't suspect them once they realize the blast wasn't caused by magic," I mused. Mikhail's earlier words returned to me. "And hey, where *did* you guys get a hold of C4? Military grade explosives are kind of extreme, even for you."

No one answered me because three guardians suddenly leapt out into our

path. Apparently, they weren't all out at the church. Dimitri and I surged ahead of our group, moving as one, just as we always had in battle together. Adrian had said the illusion he'd stretched over our group wouldn't hold if anyone was facing us directly. I wanted to make sure Dimitri and I were the first line of contact with these guardians, in the hopes they wouldn't recognize the others behind us. I threw myself into the fight without hesitation, defensive instincts kicking in. But in those milliseconds, the reality of what I was doing truly sank in.

I'd fought guardians before and always felt guilty about it. I'd taken on the ones at Tarasov Prison, as well as the queen's guard during my arrest. I hadn't really known any of them, though. Just realizing they were my colleagues had been bad enough . . . but now? Now I was facing one of the most difficult challenges in my life, as small as it seemed. After all, three guardians were an easy match for me and Dimitri. The problem was—I *knew* these guardians. Two of them I'd run into quite a bit after graduation. They worked at Court and had always been kind to me.

The third guardian wasn't just someone I knew—she was a friend. Meredith, one of the few girls in my class at St. Vladimir's. I saw the flash of uneasiness in her eyes, a sentiment mirroring my own. This felt wrong to her too. But, she was a guardian now, and like me, she had had duty drilled into her throughout her life. She believed I was a criminal. She could see I was free and in attack mode. Procedure dictated she take me down, and honestly, I wouldn't have expected anything less. It's what I would have done had our roles been reversed. This was life and death.

Dimitri was on the other two guys, as fast and badass as ever. Meredith and I went for each other. At first, she tried to knock me down by virtue of her weight, probably in the hopes of pinning me down until backup could help grab me. Only, I was stronger. She should have known that. How many times had we sparred in the school's gym? I'd almost always won. And this was no game, no practice drill. I pushed back at her attack, punching her on the side of her jaw and desperately praying I didn't break anything. She kept moving through the pain, but—again—I was superior. I caught a hold of her shoulders and threw her down. Her head hit hard, but she remained conscious. I didn't know whether to be grateful or not. Maintaining my grip, I put her in a chokehold, waiting until her eyes closed. I released as soon as I was sure she was out, my heart twisting in my chest.

Glancing over, I saw Dimitri had also taken down his opponents. Our group kept moving as though nothing had happened, but I glanced at Eddie, knowing there was grief on my face. He looked pained too but sought to reassure me as we hurried along.

"You did what you had to," he said. "She'll be okay. Banged up, but okay."

"I hit her hard."

"The medics can deal with concussions. Hell, how many did we get in practice?"

I hoped he was right. The lines between right and wrong were getting confusing. The one good thing, I supposed, was that Meredith had been so occupied by the sight of me that she probably hadn't noticed Eddie and the others. They'd held back from the fight, hopefully keeping on Adrian's veil of

spirit while Dimitri and I took the attention.

We finally reached the garages, which were indeed more crowded than usual. Some Moroi had already driven off. One royal was hysterical because her driver had her car's keys, and she didn't know where he was. She was shouting to passers-by to see if anyone could hotwire the car for her.

Dimitri led us purposefully forward, never wavering. He knew exactly where we were going. There had been a lot of planning, I realized. Most of which had probably happened yesterday. Why had Lissa obscured it from me? Wouldn't it have been better for me to have a heads-up on the plan?

We scurried through the people, heading toward the garage on the very farthest side. There, sitting just outside of it and seemingly ready to go, was a drab gray Honda Civic. A man stood near it, arms crossed as he examined the windshield. Hearing our approach, he turned around.

"Abe!" I exclaimed.

My illustrious father turned and gave me one of those charming smiles that could lure the unwary to their doom.

"What are you doing here?" demanded Dimitri. "You'll be on the list of suspects too! You were supposed to stay back with the others."

Abe shrugged. He looked remarkably unconcerned at Dimitri's angry expression. I wouldn't have wanted that fury directed at me. "Vasilisa will make sure a few people at the palace swear they saw me there during suspicious times." He turned his dark eyes toward me. "Besides, I couldn't leave without telling you goodbye, could I?"

I shook my head in exasperation. "Was this all part of your plan as my lawyer? I don't recall explosive escapes being part of legal training."

"Well, I'm sure it wasn't part of Damon Tarus's legal training." Abe's smile never wavered. "I told you, Rose. You will never face execution—or even a trial, if I can help it." He paused. "Which, of course, I can."

I hesitated, glancing toward the car. Dimitri stood by it with a set of keys, looking impatient. Adrian's words echoed in my memory.

"If I run, it's just going to make me seem that much more guilty."

"They already think you're guilty," said Abe. "You wasting away in that cell won't change that. This just ensures we now have more time to do what we need to without your execution looming over us."

"And what are you going to do exactly?"

"Prove you're innocent," said Adrian. "Or, well, that you didn't kill my aunt. I've known for a while you aren't all that innocent."

"What, are you guys going to destroy the evidence?" I asked, ignoring the dig.

"No," said Eddie. "We have to find who really did kill her."

"You guys shouldn't be involved with that, now that I'm free. It's my problem. Isn't that why you got me out?"

"It's a problem you can't solve while you're at Court," said Abe. "We need you gone and safe."

"Yeah, but I—"

"We're wasting time arguing," said Dimitri. His gaze fell on the other garages. The crowds were still chaotic, too busy with their own fears to notice us yet. That didn't affect Dimitri's concern. He handed me a silver stake, and I

didn't question the reasons. It was a weapon, something I couldn't turn down. "I know everything looks disorganized, but you'll be amazed at how quickly the guardians will restore order. And when they do, they're going to lock this place down."

"They don't need to," I said slowly, my mind spinning. "We're already going to have trouble going out of Court. We'll be stopped—if we can even get to the gate. There are going to be cars lined up for miles!"

"Ah, well," said Abe, idly studying his fingertips. "I have it on good authority there's going to be a new 'gate' opening up soon over on the south side of the wall."

The truth dawned on me. "Oh lord. You're the one who's been doling out C4."

"You make it sound so easy," he said with a frown. "That stuff's hard to get a hold of."

Dimitri's patience was at an end. "All of you: Rose needs to leave *now*. She's in danger. I'll drag her out if I have to."

"You don't have to go with me," I shot back, kind of offended at the presumption. Memories of our recent arguments emerged, of Dimitri saying he couldn't love me and didn't even want to be friends. "I'll take care of myself. No one else needs to get in trouble. Give me the keys."

Instead, Dimitri gave me one of those rueful looks that said he thought I was being utterly ridiculous. We could have been back in class at St. Vladimir's Academy.

"Rose, I can't really get in any more trouble. Someone has to be responsible for helping you, and I'm the best choice." I wasn't so sure of that. If Tatiana really had made progress in convincing people Dimitri wasn't a threat, this escapade would ruin it all.

"Go," said Eddie, surprising me with a quick hug. "We'll be in touch through Lissa." I realized then that I was fighting a losing battle with this group. It really was time to leave.

I hugged Mikhail too, murmuring in his ear, "Thank you. Thank you so much for your help. I swear, we'll find her. We'll find Sonya." He gave me that sad smile of his and didn't reply.

Adrian was the hardest to leave behind. I could tell it was difficult for him too, no matter how relaxed his grin seemed. He couldn't be happy about me going off with Dimitri. Our hug lasted a little bit longer than the others, and he gave me a soft, brief kiss on the lips. I almost felt like crying after how brave he'd been tonight. I wished he could go with me but knew he'd be safer here.

"Adrian, thank you for—"

He held up his hand. "It's not goodbye, little dhampir. I'll see you in your dreams."

"If you stay sober enough."

He winked. "For you I just might."

A loud booming noise interrupted us, and we saw a flash of light off to my right. People near the other garages screamed.

"There, you see?" asked Abe, quite pleased with himself. "A new gate. Perfect timing."

I gave him a reluctant hug too and was surprised when he didn't pull back right away. He smiled at me . . . fondly. "Ah, my daughter," he said. "Eighteen, and already you've been accused of murder, aided felons, and acquired a death count higher than most guardians will ever see." He paused. "I couldn't be prouder."

I rolled my eyes. "Goodbye, old man. And thanks." I didn't bother asking him about the "felons" part. Abe wasn't stupid. After I'd asked him about a prison that had later been breeched, he'd probably figured out who was behind Victor Dashkov's escape.

And like that, Dimitri and I were in the car, speeding off toward Abe's "new gate." I regretted not being able to say goodbye to Lissa. We were never truly apart with the bond, but it couldn't take the place of face-to-face communication. Still, it was worth it to know she would be safe and free of any connection to my escape. I hoped.

Like always, Dimitri drove, which I still thought was totally unfair. It had been one thing when I was his student, but now? Wouldn't he *ever* give up that wheel? This didn't seem like the time to discuss it, though—particularly since I didn't plan on us staying together much longer.

A few people had come out to see where the wall had blown up, but no one official had surfaced yet. Dimitri raced through the gap as impressively as Eddie had when he'd driven through Tarasov Prison's gate, only the Civic didn't handle the bumpy, grassy terrain as well as the SUV in Alaska. The problem with making your own exit was that it didn't come with an actual road. Even that was beyond Abe.

"Why is our getaway car a Civic?" I asked. "It's not really great for off-roading."

Dimitri didn't look at me but continued navigating over the rough ground toward a more drivable area. "Because Civics are one of the most common cars out there and don't attract attention. And this should be the only off-roading we do. Once we hit a freeway, we're putting as much distance between us and Court as we can—before abandoning the car, of course."

"Abandon—" I shook my head, letting it go. We reached a dirt road that felt like the smoothest surface on earth after that jolting start. "Look, now that we're out of there, I want you to know that I mean it: you don't have to come with me. I appreciate your help in the escape. Really. But hanging out with me won't do you any favors. They'll be hunting for me more than you. If you take off, you can live somewhere around humans and not be treated like a lab animal. You might even be able to slink back to Court. Tasha would put up a fight for you."

Dimitri didn't answer for a long time. It drove me crazy. I wasn't the kind of person who handled silence well. It made me want to chatter and fill the void. Plus, the longer I sat there, the more it hit me that *I was alone with Dimitri*. Like, really and truly alone for the first time since he'd become a dhampir. I felt like a fool, but in spite of the dangers we still risked . . . well, I was still overwhelmed by him. There was something so powerful about his presence. Even when he made me angry, I still found him attractive. Maybe the adrenaline pounding through me was addling my brain.

Whatever it was, I was consumed by more than just his physical aspects—

though they were certainly distracting. The hair, the face, his closeness to me, his scent . . . I felt it all, and it made my blood burn. But the inner Dimitri—the Dimitri who'd just led a small army through a prison break—captivated me just as much. It took me a moment to realize why this was so powerful: I was seeing the old Dimitri again, the one I'd worried was gone forever. He wasn't. He was back.

At long last, Dimitri replied, "I'm not leaving you. None of your Rose-logic arguments are going to work. And if you try to get away from me, I'll just find you."

I didn't doubt he could, which just made the situation more confusing. "But why? I don't want you with me." I still felt a lingering attraction for him, yes, but that didn't change the fact that he had hurt me in breaking things off between us. He had rejected me, and I needed to harden my heart, particularly if I wanted to move on with Adrian. Clearing my name and leading a normal life seemed far away right now, but if it happened, I wanted to be able to return to Adrian with open arms.

"It doesn't matter what you want," he said. "Or what I want." Ouch. "Lissa asked me to protect you."

"Hey, I don't need anyone to—"

"And," he continued, "I meant what I said to her. I swore I'd serve her and help her for the rest of my life, anything she asks. If she wants me to be your bodyguard, then that's what I'll be." He gave me a dangerous look. "There's no way you're getting rid of me anytime soon."

FIVE

GETTING AWAY FROM DIMITRI WASN'T just about our rocky romantic past. I'd meant it when I said I didn't want him getting in trouble because of me. If the guardians found me, my fate wouldn't be that much different from what I'd already been facing. But Dimitri? He'd been making baby steps toward acceptance. Sure, that was pretty much destroyed now, but his chance for a life wasn't over. If he didn't want to live at Court or with humans, he could go back to Siberia and return to his family. Out there in the middle of nowhere, he'd be hard to find. And with how close that community was, they'd go to a lot of trouble to hide him if someone ever did try to hunt him down. Staying with me was definitely the wrong option. I just needed to convince him.

"I know what you're thinking," Dimitri said, after we'd been on the road for about an hour.

We hadn't spoken much, both of us lost in our own thoughts. After a few more country roads, we'd finally made it to an interstate and were making good time toward . . . well, I had no idea. I'd been staring out the window, pondering all the disasters around me and how I alone could fix them.

"Huh?" I glanced over at him.

I thought there might be the smallest hint of a smile on his lips, which seemed absurd considering this was probably the worst situation he'd been in since being restored from his Strigoi state.

"And it won't work," he added. "You're planning how to get away from me, probably when we eventually stop for gas. You're thinking maybe you'll have a chance to run off then."

The crazy thing was, I *had* been thinking very much along those lines. The old Dimitri was a good partner on the road, but I wasn't so sure I liked having his old ability to guess my thoughts back as well.

"This is a waste of time," I said, gesturing around the car.

"Oh? You have better things to do than flee the people who want to lock you up and execute you? Please don't tell me again that this is too dangerous for me."

I glared. "It's about more than just you. Running away shouldn't be my only concern. I should be helping clear my name, not hiding in whatever remote place you're undoubtedly taking me to. The answers are at Court."

"And you have lots of friends at Court who will be working on that. It'll be easier on them if they know you're safe."

"What I want to know is why no one told me about this—or, I mean, why Lissa didn't. Why'd she hide it? Don't you think I'd have been more helpful if I'd been ready?"

"We did the fighting, not you," Dimitri said. "We were afraid if you knew, you might give away that something was up."

"I would have never told!"

"Not intentionally, no. But if you were tense or anxious . . . well, your guards can pick up on those kinds of things."

"Well, now that we're out, can you tell me where we're going? Was I right? Is it some crazy, remote place?"

No answer.

I narrowed my eyes at him. "I hate not being in the loop."

That tiny smile on his lips grew a little bigger. "Well, I have my own personal theory that the more you don't know, the more your curiosity is likely to make sure you stick around with me."

"That's ridiculous," I replied, though really, it wasn't all that unreasonable of a theory. I sighed. "When the hell did things get so out of control? When did you guys start being the masterminds? I'm the one who comes up with the wacky, impossible plans. I'm supposed to be the general here. Now I'm barely a lieutenant."

He started to say something else but then froze for a few seconds, his face instantly taking on that wary, lethal guardian look. He swore in Russian.

"What's wrong?" I asked. His attitude was contagious, and I immediately forgot all thoughts of crazy plans.

In the erratic flash of headlights from oncoming traffic, I could see his eyes dart up to the rearview mirror. "We have a tail. I didn't think it would happen this soon."

"Are you sure?" It had grown dark, and the number of cars on the highway had increased. I didn't know how anyone could spot one suspicious car among that many, but well . . . he was Dimitri.

He swore again and suddenly, in a maneuver that made me grab the dashboard, he cut sharply across two lanes, barely missing a minivan that expressed its annoyance with a lot of honking. There was an exit right there, and he just barely made it without clipping the exit ramp's rail. I heard more honking, and when I looked back, I saw the headlights of a car that had made just as crazy a move to follow us onto the exit.

"The Court must have gotten the word out pretty fast," he said. "They had someone watching the interstates."

"Maybe we should have taken back roads."

He shook his head. "Too slow. None of it would have been an issue once we switched cars, but they found us too soon. We'll have to get a new one here. This is the biggest city we'll hit before the Maryland border."

A sign said we were in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and as Dimitri skillfully drove us down a busy, commerce-filled road, I could see the tail mirroring everything we did. "What exactly is your plan to get a new car?" I asked warily.

"Listen carefully," he said, ignoring my question. "It is very, *very* important that you do exactly as I say. No improvising. No arguing. There are guardians

in that car, and by now, they've alerted every other guardian around here—possibly even the human police."

"Wouldn't the police catching us create a few problems?"

"The Alchemists would sort it out and make sure we ended up back with the Moroi."

The Alchemists. I should have known they'd get involved. They were a secret society of humans who helped protect Moroi and dhampir interests, keeping us out of the mainstream human public. Of course, the Alchemists didn't do it out of kindness. They thought we were evil and unnatural and mostly wanted to make sure we stayed on the fringes of their society. An escaped "criminal" like me would certainly be a problem they would want to help the Moroi with.

Dimitri's voice was hard and commanding when he spoke again, though his eyes weren't on me. They were busy scanning the sides of the road. "No matter what you think of the choices everyone's been making for you, no matter how unhappy you are with this situation, you know—I know you do—that I've never failed you when our lives were at stake. You trusted me in the past. Trust me now."

I wanted to tell him that what he said wasn't entirely true. He *had* failed me. When he'd been taken down by Strigoi, when he'd shown that he wasn't perfect, he had failed me by shattering the impossible, godly image I had of him. But my life? No, he had always kept mine safe. Even as a Strigoi, I'd never entirely been convinced he could kill me. The night the Academy had been attacked, when he'd been turned, he'd told me to obey him without question too. It had meant leaving him to fight Strigoi, but I'd done it.

"Okay," I said quietly. "I'll do whatever you say. Just remember not to talk down to me. I'm not your student anymore. I'm your equal now."

He glanced away from the side of the road just long enough to give me a surprised look. "You've always been my equal, Roza."

The use of the affectionate Russian nickname made me too stupid to respond, but it didn't matter. Moments later, he was all business again. "There. Do you see that movie theater sign?"

I gazed down the road. There were so many restaurants and stores that their signs made a glittering haze in the night. At last, I saw what he meant. WESTLAND CINEMA.

"Yes."

"That's where we're going to meet."

We were splitting up? I'd wanted to part ways but not like this. In the face of danger, separating suddenly seemed like an awful idea. I'd promised not to argue, though, and kept listening.

"If I'm not there in a half hour, you call this number and go without me." Dimitri handed me a small piece of paper from his duster pocket. It had a phone number scrawled on it, not one I recognized.

If I'm not there in a half hour. The words were so shocking that I couldn't help my protest this time. "What do you mean if you're not—ah!"

Dimitri made another abrupt turn, one that caused him to run a red light and only narrowly miss a number of cars. More honking ensued, but the move had been too sudden for our tail to keep up. I saw our pursuers whiz past on

the main road, brake lights flashing as they searched for a place to turn around.

Dimitri had taken us into a mall parking lot. It was packed with cars, and I glanced at the clock to get a grasp for human time. Almost eight o'clock at night. Early in the Moroi day, prime entertainment time for humans. He drove past a few entrances to the mall and finally selected one, pulling into a handicap spot. He was out of the car in one fluid motion, with me following just as quickly.

"Here's where we split up," he said jogging toward a set of doors. "Move fast, but don't run when we're inside. Don't attract attention. Blend in. Wind through it for a little bit; then get out through any exit but this one. Walk out near a group of humans and then head for the theater." We stepped into the mall. "Go!"

As though afraid I might not move, he gave me a small push toward an escalator while he took off on the main floor. There was a part of me that wanted to just freeze and stand there, that felt dumbfounded by the sudden onslaught of people, light, and activity. I soon pushed that startled part aside and began heading up the escalator. Fast reflexes and instinctual reactions were part of my training. I'd honed them in school, in my travels, and with him.

Everything I'd been taught about eluding someone came rushing back to my head. What I wanted to do more than anything was look around and see if I had a follower, but that would have definitely attracted attention. I had to imagine that, at most, we had a couple minutes' lead on our pursuers. They would have had to turn around to get back to the mall and then circle to spot our car, presuming they figured out we'd gone into the mall. I didn't think Harrisburg had enough of a Moroi presence to summon very many guardians on short notice. The ones they had would likely split up, some searching the mall and some guarding the entrances. This place had too many doors for the guardians to watch them all; my escape choice would be pure luck.

I walked as fast as I reasonably could, weaving through couples, families with strollers, and giggling teens. I envied that last group. Their lives seemed so easy compared to mine. I also passed the usual mall stores, their names registering but not much more: Ann Taylor, Abercrombie, Forever 21 . . . Ahead of me, I could see the center of the mall where several corridors branched out. I'd have a choice to make soon.

Passing an accessories store, I ducked inside and pretended to look at headbands. As I did, I covertly glanced back out to the mall's main section. I saw nothing obvious. No one had stopped; no one had followed me into the store. Beside the headbands section was a clearance bin filled with items that obviously deserved to be on clearance. One item was a "girly" baseball cap, hot pink with a star done in rainbow rhinestones on the front. It was god-awful.

I bought it, grateful the guardians hadn't taken away the meager cash I'd had on me when arrested. They probably figured it wasn't enough to bribe anyone. I also bought a ponytail holder, all the while still keeping an eye on the store's doorway. Before leaving, I bound my hair up as much as I could with the holder and then put on the hat. There was something silly about

being reduced to disguises, but my hair was an easy way to ID me. It was a deep, almost-black brown, and my lack of any recent haircut had it hanging to my mid-back. In fact, between that and Dimitri's height, we would have made a very conspicuous pair walking through here.

I merged back into the shoppers and soon reached the mall's center. Not wanting to show any hesitation, I took a left toward Macy's. As I walked, I felt slightly embarrassed at the hat and wished I'd at least had time to find a more stylish one. Minutes later, when I spotted a guardian, I was glad I'd made such a quick fashion choice.

He was near one of those carts you always see in the center of malls, pretending to be interested in cell phone covers. I recognized him first because of his stance and the way he was managing to act interested in a zebra print phone cover while simultaneously searching around him. Plus, dhampirs could always distinguish each other from humans with close enough examination. For the most part, our two races appeared pretty identical, but I could spot one of my own.

I made sure not to look right at him and felt his eyes pass over me. I didn't know him, which meant he probably didn't know me either. He was likely going off a photo he'd seen once and expected my hair to be a big giveaway. Keeping as casual an air as I could, I moved past him at a leisurely pace, glancing in windows that kept my back to him but sent no obvious messages that I was on the run. All the while, my heart pounded in my chest. Guardians could kill me on sight. Did that apply to the middle of a mall? I didn't want to find out.

When I was clear of the cart, I picked up my pace a little. Macy's would have its own outside door, and now it was just a gamble to see whether or not I'd made a good call coming in this direction. I entered the store, went down its escalator, and headed toward the main floor exit—passing a very nice selection of cute berets and fedoras. I paused near them, not because I planned on upgrading my hat, but because it allowed me to fall in step just behind a group of girls who were also exiting.

We left the store together, and my eyes quickly adjusted to the change in light. There were lots of people around, but I again saw nothing threatening. My girls stopped to chat, giving me an opportunity to get my bearings without appearing totally lost. To my right, I spotted the busy road Dimitri and I had come in on, and from there, I knew how to get to the movie theater. I exhaled in relief and cut across the parking lot, still watching my surroundings.

The farther I walked from the mall, the less crowded the parking lot became. Lampposts kept it from being totally dark, but there was still an eerie feel as things grew quieter and quieter. My initial impulse was to head right for the road and take the sidewalk directly to the theater. It was well lit and had people. But a moment later, I decided it was too conspicuous. I was pretty sure I could cut across parking lots much more quickly to get to the theater.

It proved true—kind of. I had the theater in sight when I realized I had been followed after all. Not far ahead of me, the shadow of a parking lamp's post didn't cast correctly. The shadow was too broad. Someone was behind the pole. I doubted a guardian had coincidentally picked this spot in the hopes Dimitri or I would come by. Most likely it was a scout who'd seen me and

circled ahead for an ambush.

I kept walking, trying not to obviously slow down, though every muscle in my body was tensing for attack. *I* had to be the one who attacked first. I had to be in control.

My moment came, seconds before I suspected my ambusher would have made his move. I leapt out, throwing him—it turned out to be a dhampir I didn't recognize—against a nearby car. Yup. I'd surprised him. Of course, the surprise was mutual when the car's alarm went off, blaring into the night. I winced, trying to ignore the shrieking as I punched my captive on the left side of his jaw. I had to make the most of having him pinned.

The force of my fist knocked his head against the car, but he took it admirably, promptly pushing back in an effort to free himself. He was stronger, and I did stumble a little, but not enough to lose my balance. What I lacked in strength, I made up for in speed. I dodged each attempt at me, but it brought me little satisfaction. That stupid car alarm was still going strong, and it was eventually going to attract the attention of other guardians or human authorities.

I dashed around the side of the car, and he gave chase, stopping when we were on opposite sides. It was like two kids playing keep-away. We mirrored each other as he tried to anticipate which direction I'd go. In the dim lighting, I saw something surprising tucked into his belt: a gun. My blood ran cold. Guardians were trained to use guns but rarely carried them. Stakes were our weapon of choice. We were in the business of killing Strigoi, after all, and guns were ineffective. But against me? Yeah. A gun simplified his job, but I had a feeling he'd hesitate to use it. A car alarm could be blamed on someone accidentally getting too close, but a gunshot? That would elicit a call to the police. This guy wouldn't fire if he could help it—but he *would* if he ran out of options. This needed to end soon.

At last I made a move toward the front of the car. He tried to intercept me, but then I surprised him by springing onto the car's hood (because honestly, at this point, it wasn't like the alarm could get any louder). In my split second of advantage, I threw myself off the car and onto him, knocking him flat to the ground. I landed on top of his stomach and held him down with all my weight while my hands went around his neck. He struggled, trying to throw me off, and nearly succeeded. At last, the lack of air won out. He stopped moving and fell into unconsciousness. I let go.

For a brief moment, I had a flashback to our escape from Court, when I'd used the same technique on Meredith. I saw her lying on the ground all over again and felt that same pang of guilt. Then, I shook it off. Meredith was okay. Meredith wasn't even here. None of that mattered. All that mattered was that this guy was out of commission, and I had to get out of here. Now.

Without looking to see if others were coming, I tore off across the parking lot toward the theater. I stopped once I had some distance between me and the wailing car, using another car as cover. I saw no one near the guy yet, but over by the parking lot's front, close to the mall, there seemed to be some activity. I didn't stick around to get a closer look. Whatever it was, it couldn't be good for me.

I reached the theater a couple minutes later, breathless more from fear than

exhaustion. Running endurance was something I had built up a lot of, thanks to Dimitri. But where *was* Dimitri? Theatergoers mingled around, some giving my disheveled state an odd look, as they either waited for tickets or discussed what movie they'd just seen. I saw no sign of Dimitri anywhere.

I had no watch. How long had passed since we'd parted? Surely not a half hour. I walked around the theater, staying obscured in the crowd, searching for any indication of Dimitri or more pursuers. Nothing. Minutes ticked by. Uneasily, I reached into my pocket and touched the piece of paper with the phone number. Leave, he'd told me. Leave and call the number. Of course, I had no cell phone, but that was the least of my problems right now—

"Rose!"

A car pulled up at the curb where others were dropping people off. Dimitri was leaning out the driver's side window, and I nearly fell over in relief. Well, okay, not nearly. In reality, I didn't waste a moment in hurrying over to him and hopping into the passenger seat. Without a word, he hit the gas and got us away from the theater and back to the main road.

We said nothing at first. He was so wound up and on edge, it seemed the slightest provocation would make him snap in half. He drove as fast as he could without attracting police attention, all the while glancing into the rearview mirror.

"Is there anyone behind us?" I asked at last, as he drove back onto the highway.

"It doesn't look like it. It'll take them a while to figure out what car we're in."

I hadn't paid much attention when I'd entered, but we were in a Honda Accord—another ordinary-looking car. I also noticed that there was no key in the ignition.

"Did you hotwire this car?" I then rephrased my question. "Did you *steal* this car?"

"You have an interesting set of morals," he observed. "Breaking out of jail is okay. But steal a car, and you sound totally outraged."

"I'm just more surprised than outraged," I said, leaning back against the seat. I sighed. "I was afraid . . . well, for a moment there, I was afraid you weren't coming. That they'd caught you or something."

"No. Most of my time was spent sneaking out and finding a suitable car."

A few minutes of silence fell. "You didn't ask what happened to me," I pointed out, a little miffed.

"Don't need to. You're here. That's what counts."

"I got in a fight."

"I can tell. Your sleeve is ripped."

I glanced down. Yup, ripped. I'd also lost the hat in my mad dash. No big loss. "Don't you want to know anything about the fight?"

His eyes stayed on the road ahead of us. "I already know. You took down your enemy. You did it fast, and you did it well. Because you're just that good."

I pondered his words for a moment. They were matter-of-fact, all business . . . and yet, his statement brought a tiny smile to my lips. "Okay. So what now, General? Don't you think they'll scan reports of stolen cars and get our license

plate number?"

"Likely. But by then, we'll have a new car—one they won't have any clue about."

I frowned. "How are you pulling that off?"

"We're meeting someone in a few hours."

"Damn it. I *really* hate being the last one to know about everything."

'A few hours' put us in Roanoke, Virginia. Most of our drive had passed uneventfully up until that point. But as the city came into view, I noticed Dimitri watching the exit signs until he found the one he wanted. Turning off the interstate, he continued checking for a tail and found none. We reached another commerce-filled road, and he drove to a McDonald's that stood out clearly from the rest of the businesses.

"I don't suppose," I said, "that this is a food break?"

"This," he responded, "is where we catch our next ride."

He drove around the restaurant's parking lot, his eyes scanning for something, though I didn't initially know what. I spotted it a fraction of a second before he did. In the far corner of the lot, I saw a woman leaning against a tan SUV, her back to us. I couldn't see much of her except that she wore a dark shirt and had tousled blond hair that almost touched her shoulders.

Dimitri pulled into the spot next to her vehicle, and I was out of ours the second he hit the brake. I recognized her before she even turned around.

"Sydney?" The name came out as a question, though I knew for sure it was her.

Her head turned, and I saw a familiar face—a human face—with brown eyes that could turn amber in the sun and a faint gold tattoo on her cheek.

"Hey, Rose," she said, a rueful smile playing on her lips. She held up a McDonald's bag. "Figured you'd be hungry."

SIX

REALLY, WHEN YOU THOUGHT ABOUT it, Sydney showing up wasn't much weirder than half the other stuff that seemed to happen to me on a regular basis. Sydney was an Alchemist, one I'd met in Russia when trying to find and kill Dimitri. She was my age and had hated being assigned over there, though I'd certainly appreciated her aid. As Dimitri had noted earlier, the Alchemists would want to help the Moroi find and capture me. Yet, judging from the tension radiating off both her and Dimitri in the car, it became obvious that she was assisting in this escape.

With great effort, I pushed my questions to the side for the time being. We were still fugitives, still undoubtedly being pursued. Sydney's car was a brand new Honda CR-V with Louisiana plates and a rental sticker.

"What the hell?" I asked. "Is this daring escape being sponsored by Honda?" When this got no response, I went to the next obvious question. "Are we going to New Orleans?" That was Sydney's new post. Sightseeing was the last thing on my mind at the moment, but if you had to run away, you might as well run somewhere good.

"No," she said, backing out of the spot. "We're going to West Virginia."

I looked sharply at Dimitri, who sat in the backseat, in the hopes that he would deny this. He didn't.

"I assume by 'West Virginia,' you actually mean 'Hawaii,'" I said. "Or some place equally exciting."

"Honestly, I think you're better off avoiding excitement right now," Sydney pointed out. The car's GPS device directed her to her next turn, leading us back toward I-81. She frowned slightly. "And West Virginia's actually really pretty."

I remembered that she was from Utah and probably didn't know any better. Having long since given up on any control in this escape plot, I moved on to the next obvious set of questions.

"Why are you helping us?"

I had a feeling Sydney was grimacing in the dark. "Why do you think?"

"Abe."

She sighed. "I'm really starting to wonder if New Orleans was worth it."

I'd recently learned that Abe—with that inexplicable, far-reaching influence of his—had been responsible for getting her out of Russia. How he'd done it, I didn't know. What I did know was that it had left Sydney in open-ended debt to him, one he kept using to get favors. Sometimes, I wondered if there was

more to the deal than just a job transfer, like maybe he'd done something else that neither had told me about. Regardless, I started to chastise her again that she should have expected this for making a deal with the devil, but I soon reconsidered. With a bunch of guardians in pursuit, it probably wasn't a smart idea to tease someone helping me. I asked a different question.

"Okay. So why are we going to West Virginia?"

Sydney opened her mouth to respond, but Dimitri interrupted her. "Not yet."

I turned around again and shot him a glare. "I am so sick of this! We've been on the run for six hours now, and I still don't know all the details. I get that we're staying away from the guardians, but are we seriously going to West Virginia? Are we going to make some cabin our base of operation? Like, one on the side of a mountain that doesn't have plumbing?"

Sydney gave me one of her trademark exasperated sighs. "Do you actually know anything *about* West Virginia?"

I didn't like her and Dimitri teaming up to keep me in the dark. Of course, with Sydney, her reticence could be from any number of things. It could still be Abe's orders. Or maybe she just didn't want to talk to me. Since most Alchemists considered dhampirs and vampires the spawn of hell, they didn't usually get too friendly with us. Spending time with me in Siberia had altered her views a little. I hoped. Sometimes I got the vibe she just wasn't that social of a person to begin with.

"You know we've been set up, right?" I asked her. "We didn't really do anything. They say I killed the queen, but—"

"I know," Sydney interrupted. "I've heard all about it. All the Alchemists know about it. You two are at the top of our most wanted list." She attempted a businesslike tone but couldn't entirely hide her uneasiness. I had a feeling Dimitri made her more nervous than I did, which was understandable since he made some of our own people nervous too.

"I didn't do it," I insisted. Somehow, it was important that she know that.

Sydney didn't acknowledge my comment. Instead, she said, "You should eat. Your food's getting cold. We've got a little over three hours to go and won't be stopping except for gas."

I recognized the finality in her voice, as well as the logic. She didn't want to talk anymore. Inside the bag, I found two giant orders of fries, and three cheeseburgers. She apparently still knew me pretty well. It took all of my restraint to keep from stuffing fries into my mouth then and there. Instead, I offered a cheeseburger to Dimitri.

"You want one? Gotta keep up your strength."

He hesitated several seconds before taking it. He seemed to regard it with a kind of wonder, and it hit me that eating food was still a new thing for him after these last few months. Strigoi only subsisted on blood. I handed him a couple of fries too and then turned back around to devour the rest. I didn't bother offering any to Sydney. She was notorious for her lack of appetite, and besides, I figured she would have eaten already if she'd wanted to while waiting for us.

"I think this is for you," Dimitri said, handing me a small backpack. I opened it and found a few changes of clothes, as well as some basic toiletries. I double-checked the outfits.

"Shorts, shirts, and a dress. I can't fight in these. I need jeans." The dress was cute, admittedly: a long gauzy sun-dress in a watercolor print of black, white, and gray. But very impractical.

"That's gratitude for you," said Sydney. "This happened kind of fast. There was only so much I could put together."

Glancing behind me, I saw Dimitri unpacking his own bag. It had basic clothing like mine and also—

"A duster?" I exclaimed, watching him pull out the long, leather coat. How it even fit in there defied physics. "You managed to get him a duster, but you couldn't find me a pair of jeans?"

Sydney seemed unconcerned by my outrage. "Abe said it was essential. Besides, if all goes like it's supposed to, you won't be doing any fighting." I didn't like the sound of that. *Safe and remote.*

Seeing as I had what were potentially the quietest car companions in the world, I knew better than to expect any real conversation for the next three hours. I supposed it was just as well because it let me check in on Lissa. I was still too on edge about my own escape to spend much time in her head, so it was just a quick assessment of life at Court.

Just as Dimitri had predicted, the guardians had restored order pretty soon. The Court was under lockdown, and everyone with any connection to me was being questioned extensively. The thing was, they all had alibis. Everyone had seen my allies at the funeral—or, in Abe's case, *thought* they'd seen them. A couple girls swore they'd been with Adrian, which I could only imagine was the result of more compulsion. I could feel Lissa's satisfaction through the bond as the guardians' frustration grew and grew.

Although she had no idea when I might be checking in on her, she sent me a message through the bond: *Don't worry, Rose. I'll take care of everything. We're going to clear your name.*

I slumped back in the car seat, unsure how to feel about this situation. All my life, I'd taken care of her. I'd protected her from danger and gone out of my way to keep her away from any threats. Now, the roles were reversed. She'd come through for me in saving Dimitri, and I was in her—and apparently everyone else's—hands as far as this escape was concerned. It went against every instinct I had and troubled me. I wasn't used to being protected by others, let alone her.

The interrogations were still going on, and Lissa hadn't had hers yet, but something told me my friends were going to get off the hook for this. They wouldn't be punished for my escape, and for the moment, I was really the only one in danger—which was what I preferred.

West Virginia might have been as beautiful as Sydney claimed, but I couldn't really tell since it was the middle of the night when we arrived. Mostly I had the sense of driving through mountains, feeling the ups and downs as we went through switchbacks and tunnels. After almost exactly three hours, we rolled into a small hole of a town that had one traffic light and a restaurant simply marked DINER. There hadn't been any traffic on the road for over an hour, though, which was really the most important thing. We hadn't been followed.

Sydney drove us to a building with a sign that read MOTEL. Apparently, this

town liked to stick to the basics when it came to names. I wouldn't be surprised if it was actually just called TOWN. As we walked across the motel's parking lot, I was surprised to feel how sore my legs were. Every part of me ached, and sleep sounded fantastic. It had been more than half a day since this adventure began.

Sydney checked us in under fake names, and the sleepy desk clerk didn't ask any questions. We walked down a hall that wasn't dirty exactly but also wasn't anything a royal would have gone near. A cleaning cart leaned against one wall, as though someone had given up and abandoned it. Sydney suddenly came to a halt in front of a room and handed us a key. I realized she was heading off to a different room.

"We're not all staying together?" I asked.

"Hey, if you guys get caught, I don't want to be anywhere near you," she said, with a smile. I had a feeling she also didn't want to sleep in the same room as "evil creatures of the night." "I'll still be nearby, though. We'll talk in the morning."

This made me realize something else. I eyed Dimitri. "We're sharing a room?"

Sydney shrugged. "All the better to defend yourselves."

She left us in that abrupt way of hers, and Dimitri and I glanced at each other briefly before heading into the room. Like the rest of the motel, it wasn't fancy, but it would do. The carpet was worn but intact, and I appreciated the weak attempt at decorating with a very bad painting of some pears. A small window looked sad. There was one bed.

Dimitri locked the bolt and chain on the door and then sat back in the room's lone chair. It was wooden with a straight back, but he seemed to regard it as the most comfortable thing in the world. He still wore that perpetually vigilant look of his, but I could see exhaustion around the edges. This had been a long night for him too.

I sat down on the edge of the bed. "What now?"

"Now we wait," he said.

"For what?"

"For Lissa and the others to clear your name and find out who killed the queen."

I expected more explanation, but all I got was silence. Disbelief began to build up in me. I'd remained as patient as I could tonight, always assuming Dimitri was leading me toward some mysterious mission to help solve the murder. When he said we were going to wait, surely he didn't mean we were just going to . . . well, wait?

"What are *we* going to do?" I demanded. "How are we going to help them?"

"We told you earlier: You can hardly go looking for clues at Court. You need to stay away. You need to stay safe."

My jaw dropped as I gestured around the drab room. "What, and this is it? This is where you're stashing me? I thought . . . I thought there was something here. Something to help."

"It *is* helping," he said, in that damnably calm way of his. "Sydney and Abe researched this place and decided it was out of the way enough to avoid detection."

I shot up from the bed. "Okay, comrade. There's one serious problem here with your logic. You guys keep acting like me staying out of the way is *helping*."

"What's a serious problem is us repeating this conversation over and over. The answers to who murdered Tatiana are at Court, and that's where your friends are. They'll figure this out."

"I didn't just get in a high-speed chase and jump state lines to hole up in some crappy motel! How long are you planning on 'staying out of the way' here?"

Dimitri crossed his arms over his chest. "As long as it takes. We have the funds to stay here indefinitely."

"I probably have enough spare change in my pocket to stay here indefinitely! But it's not happening. I have to do something. I won't just take the easy way out and sit around."

"Surviving isn't as easy as you think."

"Oh God," I groaned. "You've been hanging out with Abe, haven't you? You know, when you were a Strigoi, you told me to stay away from him. Maybe you should take your own advice."

I regretted the words as soon as they left my lips and saw in his eyes that I'd inflicted serious damage. He might have been acting like the old Dimitri in this escape, but his time as a Strigoi still tormented him.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't mean—"

"We're done discussing this," he said harshly. "Lissa says we're staying here, so we're staying here."

Anger shoved aside my guilt. "*That's* why you're doing this? Because Lissa told you to?"

"Of course. I swore I'd serve and help her."

That was when I snapped. It had been bad enough that when Lissa restored him to a dhampir, Dimitri had thought it was okay to stick around Lissa while spurning me. Despite the fact that *I'd* been the one who went to Siberia and that *I* was the one who learned about how Victor's brother Robert knew how to restore Strigoi . . . well, apparently those things didn't matter. Only Lissa wielding the stake had seemed to matter, and Dimitri now held her up as some kind of angelic goddess, one he'd made an archaic, knight-like vow to serve.

"Forget it," I said. "I am *not* staying here."

I made it to the door in three steps and managed to undo the chain, but in seconds, Dimitri was out of his chair and had thrown me against the wall. Really, that was pretty slow reaction time. I would have expected him to stop me before I'd taken two steps.

"You *are* staying here," he said evenly, hands gripping my wrists. "Whether you like it or not."

Now, I had a few options. I *could* stay, of course. I could hang out for days—months, even—in this motel until Lissa cleared my name. That was presuming Lissa could clear my name and that I didn't get food poisoning from the DINER diner. This was the safest option. Also the most boring for me.

Another option was to fight my way through Dimitri. That was neither safe nor easy. It would also be particularly challenging because I'd have to try to fight in such a way that would allow me to escape but wouldn't kill him or

cause either of us serious injury.

Or, I could just throw caution away and not hold back. Hell, the guy had battled Strigoi and half the Court's guardians. He could handle me giving everything I had. We'd certainly shared some pretty rough encounters back at St. Vladimir's. Would my best be enough for me to escape? Time to find out.

I kneed him in the stomach, which he clearly hadn't expected. His eyes widened in shock—and a little pain—providing me with an opening to break free of his grip. That opening was only long enough for me to yank out the door's bolt. Before I could reach for the knob, Dimitri had a hold of me again. He gripped me hard and threw me onto the bed stomach first, both pinning me with his weight and preventing my limbs from doing any more surprise kicking. This was always my biggest problem in fights: opponents—usually men—with more strength and weight. My speed was my greatest asset in those situations, but being held down made dodging and evasion a non-option. Still, every part of me struggled, making it difficult for him to keep me down.

"Stop this," he said in my ear, his lips nearly touching it. "Be reasonable for once. You can't get past me."

His body was warm and strong against mine, and I promised my own body a stern scolding later. *Quit it*, I thought. *Focus on getting out of here, not how he feels.*

"I'm not the one being unreasonable," I growled, trying to turn my face toward him. "You're the one caught up in some noble promise that makes no sense. And I know you don't like to sit out of the action any more than I do. Help me. Help me find the murderer and do something useful." I stopped struggling and pretended our argument had distracted me.

"I don't like sitting around, but I also don't like rushing into an impossible situation!"

"Impossible situations are our specialty," I pointed out. Meanwhile, I tried to assess his hold on me. He hadn't relaxed his grip, but I hoped maybe the conversation was distracting him. Normally, Dimitri was too good to lose his focus. But I knew he was tired. And maybe, just maybe, he might be a little careless since it was me and not a Strigoi.

Nope.

I lashed out abruptly, trying to break away and scramble out from under him. The best I managed to do was roll myself over before he had a hold of me again, now leaving me back-down on the bed. Being so close to him . . . his face, his lips . . . the warmth of his skin on mine. Well. It appeared that all I'd accomplished was putting myself at a greater disadvantage. He certainly didn't seem to be affected by our bodies' closeness. He wore that typical steel resolve of his, and even though it was stupid of me, even though I knew I shouldn't care anymore that he was over me . . . well, I did care.

"One day," he said. "You can't even wait one day?"

"Maybe if we'd gone to a nicer hotel. With cable."

"This is no time for jokes, Rose."

"Then let me do something. Anything."

"I. Can't."

Saying the words obviously pained him, and I realized something. I was so mad at him, so furious that he'd try to make me sit around and play it safe.

But he didn't like any of this either. How could I have forgotten how alike we were? We both craved action. We both wanted to be useful, to help those we cared about. It was only his self-resolve to help Lissa that was keeping him here with this babysitting job. He claimed me rushing back to Court was reckless, but I had a feeling that if he hadn't been the one in charge of me—or, well, *thought* he was—he would have run right back there too.

I studied him, the determined dark eyes and expression softened by the brown hair that had escaped its ponytail holder. It hung around his face now, just barely touching mine. I could try to break free again but was losing hope of that working. He was too fierce and too set on keeping me safe. I suspected pointing out my suspicion that he wanted to go back to Court too wouldn't do any good. True or not, he would be expecting me to argue with Rose-logic. He was Dimitri, after all. He would be expecting *everything*.

Well, almost.

An idea hit me so fast that I didn't pause to analyze it. I just acted. My body might be constrained, but my head and neck had just enough freedom to shift up—and kiss him.

My lips met his, and I learned a few things. One was that it was possible to catch him totally by surprise. His body froze and locked up, shocked at the sudden turn of events. I also realized that he was just as good a kisser as I recalled. The last time we'd kissed had been when he was Strigoi. There had been an eerie sexiness to that, but it didn't compare to the heat and energy of being alive. His lips were just like I remembered from our time at St. Vladimir's, both soft and hungry at the same time. Electricity spread through the rest of my body as he kissed me back. It was both comforting and exhilarating.

And that was the third thing I discovered. *He was kissing me back*. Maybe, just maybe, Dimitri wasn't as resolved as he claimed to be. Maybe under all that guilt and certainty that he couldn't love again, he still wanted me. I would have liked to have found out. But I didn't have the time.

Instead, I punched him.

It's true: I've punched lots of guys who were kissing me but never one I actually *wanted* to keep kissing. Dimitri still had a solid hold on me, but the shock of the kiss had dropped his guard. My fist broke out and connected with the side of his face. Without missing a beat, I shoved him off me as hard as I could and leapt away from the bed and toward the door. I heard him scramble to his feet as I threw it open. I shot out of the room and slammed the door shut before I could see what he did next. Not that I needed to. He was coming after me.

Without a moment's hesitation, I shoved the abandoned cleaning cart in front of the room's door and sprinted off down the hall. A couple seconds later, the door opened, and I heard a cry of annoyance—as well as a very, very bad word in Russian—as he ran into the cart. It would only take him a few moments to push it aside, but that was all I needed. I was down the flight of stairs in a flash and into the meager lobby where a bored desk clerk was reading a book. He nearly jumped out of his chair when I came tearing through.

"There's a guy chasing me!" I called as I headed out the door.

The clerk didn't really look like anyone who would try to stop Dimitri, and I had a feeling Dimitri wouldn't stop anyway if the guy asked him to. In the most extreme case, the man would call the police. In this town, the POLICE probably consisted of one guy and a dog.

Regardless, it was no longer my concern. I had escaped the motel and was now in the middle of a sleepy mountain town, its streets cast in shadows. Dimitri might be right behind me, but as I plunged into some woods nearby, I knew it was going to be easy for me to lose him in the darkness.

SEVEN

THE PROBLEM WAS, OF COURSE, that I soon lost myself in the darkness. After living in the wilds of Montana, I was used to how completely the night could swallow you once you stepped away from even the tiniest hint of civilization. I was even used to wandering the twists and turns of dark forests. But the St. Vladimir's terrain had been familiar. The woods of West Virginia were new and foreign, and I had completely lost my bearings.

Once I was pretty sure I'd put enough distance between me and the motel, I paused and looked around. Night insects hummed and sang, and the oppressive summer humidity hung around me. Peering up through the leafy canopy of trees, I could see a brilliant sky of stars, totally untouched by city lights. Feeling like a true wilderness survivor, I studied the stars until I spotted the Big Dipper and figured out which direction was north. The mountains Sydney had driven us through had been to the east, so I certainly didn't want to go in that direction. It seemed reasonable that if I hiked north, I'd eventually hit an interstate and either hitchhike or walk my way back to civilization. It wasn't an airtight plan, but it wasn't the worst one I'd ever had, not by a long shot.

I wasn't really dressed for hiking, but as my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I managed to avoid most trees and other obstacles. Following the tiny road out of town would have been easier—but was also what Dimitri would expect me to do.

I fell into a steady, subconscious rhythm as I made my way north. I decided it was a good time to check in on Lissa, now that I had time on my hands and no guardians trying to arrest me. I slipped into her mind and found her within the depths of the guardians' headquarters, sitting in a hallway lined with chairs. Other Moroi sat nearby, including Christian and Tasha.

"They'll question you hard," Tasha murmured. "Especially *you*." That was to Christian. "You'd be my first choice if something illicitly blew up." That seemed to be everyone's opinion. From the troubled look on her face, I could see Tasha had been as surprised by my escape as I had. Even if my friends hadn't filled her in on the whole story yet, she had probably pieced most things together—at the very least, who was behind it.

Christian gave her as charming a smile as he could manage, like a kid trying to dodge being grounded. "They'll know by now that it wasn't caused by magic," he said. "The guardians will have scoured every inch of those statues." He didn't elaborate, not in public, but Lissa's mind was working along the

same lines as his. The guardians would know now the explosion hadn't been elemental. And even if my friends were the primary suspects, the authorities would have to wonder—just as I had—how teenagers would get a hold of C4.

Lissa nodded her agreement and rested her hand on Christian's. "We'll be okay."

Her thoughts turned to both Dimitri and me, wondering if we'd made it out according to the plan. She couldn't focus on finding Tatiana's killer until she knew we were safe. Like me, the breakout had been a hard choice: freeing me put me in more danger than keeping me locked up. Her emotions were keyed up, prickly and a bit wilder than I would have liked. *So much spirit*, I realized. *She's using too much.* Back at school, she'd managed it with prescription medication and later through self-control. But somewhere, as our situations grew increasingly complicated, she'd allowed herself to wield more and more. Recently, she'd used astonishing amounts, and we'd come to take it for granted. Sooner or later, Lissa's reliance on spirit would catch up with her. With us.

"Princess?" A door across from Lissa opened, and a guardian peered out. "We're ready for you."

The guardian stepped aside, and inside the room, Lissa heard a familiar voice say, "Always a pleasure speaking with you, Hans. We should do it again sometime." Abe then appeared, strutting out with his usual swagger. He stepped past the guardian in the doorway and gave Lissa and the Ozeras a winning, all-is-right-in-the-world grin. Without a word, he strode past them toward the hall's exit.

Lissa almost smiled but reined it in, putting on a sober look as she and her companions entered. The door shut behind them, and she found herself facing three guardians seated at a table. One of them I'd seen around but had never met. I think his last name was Steele. The other two I knew well. One was Hans Croft, who ran the guardians' operations at Court. Beside him—to my astonishment—was Alberta, who was in charge of St. Vladimir's guardians and novices.

"Lovely," growled Hans. "A whole entourage." Christian had insisted on being present when Lissa was questioned, and Tasha had insisted on being present with Christian. If Abe had known the interrogation time, he probably would have joined the group too, undoubtedly followed by my mother . . . Hans didn't realize he'd dodged a house party.

Lissa, Christian, and Tasha sat down opposite the guardians. "Guardian Petrov," said Lissa, ignoring Hans's disapproval. "What are you doing here?"

Alberta gave Lissa a small smile but otherwise kept in professional guardian mode. "I was here for the funeral, and Guardian Croft decided he'd like an outside opinion for the investigation."

"As well as someone familiar with Hathaway and her, uh, associates," added Hans. Hans was the kind of guy who got straight to the point. Usually, his attitude bothered me—that was my normal reaction to most authority figures—but I did respect the way he ran operations here. "This meeting was intended just for *you*, princess."

"We won't say a word," said Christian.

Lissa nodded and kept her face smooth and polite, even though there was a

trembling in her voice. "I want to help . . . I've been so, I don't know. I'm so stunned about everything that's happened."

"I'm sure," said Hans, voice dry. "Where were you when the statues exploded?"

"With the funeral procession," she said. "I was part of the escort."

Steele had a pile of papers in front of him. "That's true. There are plenty of witnesses."

"Very convenient. What about *afterward*?" asked Hans. "Where did you go when the crowd panicked?"

"Back to the Council's building. That's where all the others were meeting up, and I thought it'd be safest." I couldn't see her face but could feel her trying to look cowed. "I was afraid when things started going crazy."

"We also have witnesses to support that," said Steele.

Hans drummed his fingers on the table. "Did you have any prior knowledge about any of this? The explosions? Hathaway's breakout?"

Lissa shook her head. "No! I had no clue. I didn't even know it was possible to get out of the cells. I thought there was too much security."

Hans ignored the dig on his operations. "You've got that bond thing, right? You didn't pick up anything through that?"

"I don't read her," explained Lissa. "She sees my thoughts but not the other way around."

"That," said Alberta, speaking up at last, "is true."

Hans didn't contradict her but still wasn't buying my friends' innocence. "You realize, if you're caught concealing information—or aiding her—you'll face consequences almost as serious as hers. *All* of you. Royalty doesn't exempt you from treason."

Lissa lowered her gaze, as though his threat had frightened her. "I just can't believe . . . I just can't believe she'd do this. She was my friend. I thought I knew her. I didn't think she could do any of these things . . . I never thought she'd murder anyone." If not for the feelings in the bond, I might have taken offense. I knew the truth, though. She was acting, trying to distance herself from me. It was smart.

"Really? Because not long ago, you were swearing up and down that she was innocent," pointed out Hans.

Lissa looked back up and widened her eyes. "I thought she was! But then . . . then I heard about what she did to those guardians in the escape . . ." Her distress wasn't entirely faked this time. She still needed to act like she thought I was guilty, but the news of Meredith's condition had reached her—which truly had shocked her. That made two of us, but at least I now knew Meredith was okay.

Hans still looked skeptical at Lissa's change of heart but let it go. "What about Belikov? You swore he wasn't a Strigoi anymore, but obviously something went wrong there as well."

Christian stirred beside Lissa. As an advocate for Dimitri, Christian grew as irritated as us at the suspicions and accusations. Lissa spoke before Christian could say anything.

"He's not Strigoi!" Lissa's remorse over me vanished, her old, fierce defense of Dimitri kicking in. She hadn't expected this line of questioning about him.

She'd been preparing herself to defend me and her alibi. Hans seemed pleased at the reaction and watched her closely.

"Then how do you explain his involvement?"

"It wasn't because he was Strigoi," said Lissa, forcing her control back. Her heart was pounding rapidly. "He changed back. There's no Strigoi left."

"But he attacked a number of guardians—on more than one occasion."

It looked like Tasha wanted to interrupt now and defend Dimitri as well, but she visibly bit her lip. It was remarkable. The Ozeras liked to speak their minds, not always tactfully.

"It wasn't because he was Strigoi," Lissa repeated. "And he didn't kill any of those guardians. Not one. Rose did what she did . . . well, I don't know why. She hated Tatiana, I guess. Everyone knew that. But Dimitri . . . I'm telling you, being Strigoi had nothing to do with this. He helped her because he used to be her teacher. He thought she was in trouble."

"That was pretty extreme for a teacher, particularly one who—before turning Strigoi—was known for being level-headed and rational."

"Yeah, but he wasn't thinking rationally because—"

Lissa cut herself off, suddenly caught in a bad situation. Hans seemed to have realized quickly in this conversation that if Lissa was involved with recent events—and I don't think he was certain yet—she would have an airtight alibi. Talking to her, however, had given him the chance to pursue another puzzle in my escape: Dimitri's involvement. Dimitri had sacrificed himself to take the fall, even if it meant others not trusting him again. Lissa thought she'd made people think his actions were a former teacher's protective instinct, but apparently, not everyone was buying that.

"He wasn't thinking rationally because?" prompted Hans, eyes sharp. Before the murder, Hans had believed Dimitri truly had become a dhampir again. Something told me he still believed that but sensed there was something big dangling before him.

Lissa stayed silent. She didn't want people thinking Dimitri was Strigoi. She wanted people to believe in her powers to restore the undead. But if Dimitri helping a student didn't seem convincing enough to others, all that mistrust might surface again.

Glancing at her interrogators, Lissa suddenly met Alberta's eyes. The older guardian said nothing. She wore that neutral, scrutinizing expression that guardians excelled at. She also had an air of wisdom about her, and Lissa briefly allowed spirit to show her Alberta's aura. It had good, steady colors and energy, and in Alberta's eyes, Lissa swore she could see a message, a knowing glint.

Tell them, the message seemed to say. *It'll create problems—but they won't be as bad as your current ones.* Lissa held that gaze, wondering if she was just projecting her own thoughts onto Alberta. It didn't matter who'd come up with the idea. Lissa knew it was right.

"Dimitri helped Rose because . . . because they were involved."

As I'd guessed, Alberta wasn't surprised, and she seemed relieved to have the truth out there. Hans and Steele, however, were very surprised. I had only seen Hans shocked a few times.

"When you say 'involved,' do you mean . . ." He paused to structure his

words. "Do you mean romantically involved?"

Lissa nodded, feeling horrible. She'd revealed a big secret here, one she'd sworn she'd keep for me, but I didn't blame her. Not in this situation. Love—I hoped—would defend Dimitri's actions.

"He loved her," said Lissa. "She loved him. If he helped her escape—"

"He *did* help her escape," interrupted Hans. "He attacked guardians and blew up priceless, centuries-old statues brought over from Europe!"

Lissa shrugged. "Well, like I said. He wasn't acting rationally. He wanted to help her and probably thought she was innocent. He would have done anything for her—and it had nothing to do with Strigoi."

"Love only justifies so much." Hans clearly wasn't a romantic.

"She's underage!" exclaimed Steele. That part hadn't escaped him.

"She's eighteen," corrected Lissa.

Hans cut her a look. "I can do the math, princess. Unless they managed some beautiful, touching romance in the last few weeks—while he was mostly in isolation—then there were things going on at your school that someone should have reported."

Lissa said nothing, but from the corner of her eye, she could see Tasha and Christian. They were trying to keep their expressions neutral, but it was obvious this news wasn't a surprise to them, no doubt confirming Hans's suspicions that illicit things had been going on. I actually hadn't realized Tasha knew about Dimitri and me and felt a little bad. Had she known that part of his rejection of her had been because of me? And if she knew, how many others did? Christian had probably tipped her off, but something told me more people were probably starting to find out as well. After the school's attack, my reaction had likely been a big clue about my feelings for Dimitri. Maybe telling Hans now wasn't so big a deal after all. The secret wouldn't be a secret much longer.

Alberta cleared her throat, speaking up at last. "I think we have more important things to worry about right now than some romance that may or may not have happened."

Steele gave her an incredulous look and slammed his hand against the table. "This is pretty serious. Did *you* know about it?"

"All I know is that we're getting distracted from the point here," she replied, neatly dodging the question. Alberta was about twenty years older than Steele, and the tough look she gave him said that he was a child wasting her time. "I thought we were here to figure out if Miss Hathaway had any accomplices, not dredge up the past. So far, the only person we can say for sure that helped her is Belikov, and he did it out of irrational affection. That makes him a fugitive and a fool, not a Strigoi."

I'd never thought of my relationship with Dimitri as "irrational affection," but Alberta's point was taken. Something in Hans's and Steele's faces made me think soon the whole world would know about us, but that was nothing compared to murder. And if it cleared Dimitri of being a Strigoi, then it meant he'd be imprisoned instead of staked if ever captured. Small blessings.

Lissa's questioning continued a bit longer before the guardians decided she was free and clear of any part in my escape (that they could prove). She did a good job playing surprised and confused the whole time, even mustering a few

tears over how she could have so misjudged me. She spun a little bit of compulsion into her act too—not enough to brainwash anyone, but enough that Steele's earlier outrage transformed to sympathy. Hans was harder to read, but as my group left, he reminded Tasha and Christian that he would be speaking with each of them later, preferably without an entourage.

For now, the next person in the hot seat was waiting in the hall: Eddie. Lissa gave him the same smile she'd give any friend. There was no indication that they were both part of a conspiracy. Eddie nodded in return as he was called to the room for his interrogation. Lissa was anxious for him, but I knew his guardian self-control would make sure he stuck to the story. He probably wouldn't pull the tears Lissa had, but he'd likely act just as shocked by my "treason" as she had.

Tasha left Christian and Lissa once they were outside, first warning them to be careful. "You've gotten out of this so far, but I don't think the guardians have completely cleared you. Especially Hans."

"Hey, I can take care of myself," said Christian.

Tasha rolled her eyes. "Yes. I see what happens when you're left to your own devices."

"Hey, don't get all pissy because we didn't tell you," he exclaimed. "We didn't have time, and there were only so many people we could get involved. Besides, you've done your share of crazy plans before."

"True," Tasha admitted. She was hardly a role model for playing by the rules. "It's just that everything's gotten that much more complicated. Rose is on the run. And now Dimitri . . ." She sighed, and I didn't need her to finish to guess her thoughts. There was a profound look of sadness in her eyes, one that made me feel guilty. Just like the rest of us, Tasha had wanted Dimitri's reputation restored. By freeing the queen's accused assassin, he'd seriously damaged any chance at acceptance. I *really* wished he hadn't gotten involved and hoped my current escape plan paid off.

"This'll all work out," said Christian. "You'll see." He didn't look so confident as he spoke, and Tasha gave him a small, amused smile.

"Just be careful. Please. I don't want to see you in a cell, too. I don't have time for jail visits with everything else going on." Her amusement faded, and her outspoken activist mode kicked in. "Our family's being ridiculous, you know. Can you believe they're actually talking about running Esmond for us? Good God. We've already had one tragedy after another around here. At the very least, we should try to salvage something out of this mess."

"I don't think I know Esmond," said Christian.

"Moron," she said matter-of-factly. "Him, I mean. Not you. Someone's got to talk sense into our family before they embarrass themselves."

Christian grinned. "And let me guess: you're just the one to do it?"

"Of course," she said, a mischievous gleam in her eye. "I've already drawn up a list of ideal candidates. Our family just needs some persuasion to see how ideal they are."

"I'd feel bad for them if they weren't still being assholes to us," Christian remarked, watching his aunt walk away. The stigma of his parents turning Strigoi still lingered after all these years. Tasha accepted it more gracefully—despite her complaining—if only to be able to participate in the Ozera family's

larger decisions. Christian made no such attempts at civility. It was terrible enough to be treated as less than other Moroi, to be denied guardians and other things royals were entitled to. But from his own family? It was especially harsh. He refused to pretend it was acceptable.

"They'll come around eventually," said Lissa, sounding more optimistic than she felt.

Any response of Christian's was swallowed when a new companion fell into step with them: my father. His abrupt appearance startled both of my friends, but I wasn't surprised. He probably knew about Lissa's interrogation and had been skulking outside the building, waiting to talk to her.

"It's nice out," said Abe amiably, looking around at the trees and flowers as though the three of them were on a nature walk through Court. "But it's going to be scorching when the sun comes up."

The darkness that was giving me so much trouble in the woods of West Virginia made for pleasant, "midday" conditions for those on a vampiric schedule. Lissa gave Abe a sidelong glance. With eyes well-tuned to low light, she had no difficulty taking in the brilliant teal dress shirt under his beige sports jacket. A blind person could have probably seen him in that color.

Lissa scoffed at Abe's faked casualness. It was a habit of his, opening with small talk before moving on to more sinister topics. "You're not here to talk about the weather."

"Trying to be civilized, that's all." He fell silent as a couple of Moroi girls passed them. Once they were well out of ear-shot, he asked in a low voice, "I assume everything went well at your little meeting?"

"Fine," she said, not bothering to fill him in about "irrational affection." She knew all he'd care about was that none of their associates had been implicated.

"The guardians have Eddie now," said Christian. "And want me later, but I think that'll be it for all of us."

Lissa sighed. "Honestly, I have a feeling the interrogation was the easy part, compared to what's coming." She meant figuring out who had really killed Tatiana.

"One step at a time," murmured Abe. "No point in letting the larger picture overwhelm us. We'll just start at the beginning."

"That's the problem," said Lissa, kicking irritably at a branch lying across the cobblestone path in front of her. "I have no idea *where* to start. Whoever killed Tatiana did a good job covering their tracks and shifting it all to Rose."

"One step at a time," repeated Abe.

He spoke in that sly tone of his that annoyed me sometimes, but to Lissa today, it was grating. Until now, all of her energy had been focused on getting me out of jail and somewhere safe. That was the goal that had driven her and kept her going in my escape's aftermath.

Now, after some of the intensity had faded, the pressure of it all was beginning to crash down on her. Christian put an arm around her shoulders, sensing her dismay. He turned to Abe, unusually serious.

"Do you have any ideas?" Christian asked Abe. "We certainly don't have any real evidence."

"We have reasonable assumptions," Abe replied. "Like that whoever killed

Tatiana would have had access to her private rooms. That's not a long list."

"It's not short either." Lissa ticked off people on her fingers. "The royal guards, her friends and family . . . and that's assuming no one altered the guardians' records of her visitors. And for all we know, some visits were never logged at all. She probably had secret business meetings all the time."

"Unlikely she'd have business meetings in her bedroom, in her nightgown," mused Abe. "Of course, it depends on the type of business, I suppose."

Lissa stumbled, realization stunning her. "Ambrose."

"Who?"

"He's a dhampir . . . really good-looking . . . He and Tatiana were, um . . ."

"Involved?" said Christian with a smile, echoing the interrogation.

Now Abe came to a stop. Lissa did the same, and his dark eyes met hers. "I've seen him. Sort of a pool boy type."

"He'd have access to her bedroom," said Lissa. "But I just can't—I don't know. I can't see him doing this."

"Appearances are deceiving," said Abe. "He was terribly interested in Rose back in the courtroom."

More surprise for Lissa. "What are you talking about?"

Abe stroked his chin in an evil-villain sort of way. "He spoke to her . . . or gave her some signal. I'm not really sure, but there was some kind of interaction between them."

Clever, watchful Abe. He'd noticed Ambrose giving me the note but hadn't fully realized what had happened.

"We should talk to him then," said Christian.

Lissa nodded. Conflicting feelings churned inside of her. She was excited by a lead—but upset that it meant kind, gentle Ambrose might be a suspect.

"I'll take care of it," said Abe breezily.

I felt her gaze fall heavily on him. I couldn't see her expression, but I did see Abe take an involuntary step back, the faintest glimmer of surprise in his eyes. Even Christian flinched. "And I'm going to be there when you do," she said, steel in her voice. "Do *not* attempt some crazy torture-style interrogation without me."

"You want to be there for the torture?" asked Abe, recovering.

"There won't be any. We'll talk to Ambrose like civilized people, understand?" She stared hard at him again, and Abe finally shrugged in acquiescence, as though being overpowered by a woman half his age was no big deal.

"Fine. We'll do it together."

Lissa was a little suspicious at his willingness, and he must have picked up on that.

"We *will*," he said, continuing walking. "This is a good time—well, as good as any time—for an investigation. Court's going to get chaotic as the monarch elections get under way. Everyone here will be busy, and new people will start pouring in."

A breeze, heavy with humidity, ruffled Lissa's hair. The promise of heat was on it, and she knew Abe would be right about sunrise. It would be worth going to bed early.

"When will the elections happen?" she asked.

"As soon as they put dear Tatiana to rest. These things move fast. We need our government restored. She'll be buried tomorrow at the church with a ceremony and service, but there'll be no repeat of the procession. They're still too uneasy."

I felt kind of bad that she hadn't received a full queenly funeral in the end, but then, if it meant her true murderer was found, maybe she would have preferred it that way.

"Once the burial happens and elections begin," Abe continued, "any family who wants to put out a candidate for the crown will do so—and of course they'll want to. You've never seen a monarchial election, have you? It's quite a spectacle. Of course, before the voting occurs, all the candidates will have to be tested."

There was something ominous in the way he said "tested," but Lissa's thoughts were elsewhere. Tatiana had been the only queen she'd ever known, and the full impact of a regime change was staggering. "A new king or queen can affect everything—for better or worse. I hope it's someone good. One of the Ozeras, maybe. One of Tasha's people." She glanced hopefully at Christian, who could only shrug. "Or Ariana Szelsky. I like her. Not that it matters who I want," she added bitterly. "Seeing as I can't vote." The Council's votes determined the election's winner, so again, she was locked out of the Moroi legal process.

"A lot of work will go into the nominations," Abe explained, avoiding her last comment. "Each family will want someone to further their interests but who also has a chance of getting votes from—"

"Oomph!"

I was thrust harshly out of the calculating world of Moroi politics and back into the wilds of West Virginia—very painfully so. Something solid and fierce slammed me against the hard-packed earth, leaves and branches cutting my face and hands. Strong hands held me down, and Dimitri's voice spoke in my ear.

"You should have just hidden in town," he said, a little amused. His weight and position allowed me no room to move. "It would have been the last place I looked. Instead, I knew exactly where you'd go."

"Whatever. Don't act so smart," I said through gritted teeth, trying to break out of his hold. Goddamn it. He *was* smart. And once again, the closeness of him was disorienting. Earlier, it had seemed to affect him too, but he'd apparently learned his lesson. "You made a lucky guess, that's all."

"I don't need luck, Roza. I'll always find you. So, really it's up to you how difficult you want this situation to be." There was an almost conversational tone to his voice, made all the more ridiculous by the situation we were in. "We can do this over and over, or you can do the reasonable thing and just stay put with Sydney and me."

"It's not reasonable! It's wasteful."

He was sweating, from the heat and undoubtedly because he'd had to run pretty hard to catch up with me. Adrian wore a cologne that always made me heady, but the natural scent of Dimitri's warm skin was intoxicating too. It was amazing to me that I could keep noticing these little things—and be attracted to them—even when I was legitimately mad at him for keeping me

captive. Maybe anger was a turn-on for me.

"How many times do I have to explain the logic behind what we're doing?" he asked in exasperation.

"Until you give up." I pushed back against him, trying again to get loose, but all it did was put us closer together. I had a feeling the kissing trick wouldn't work this time.

He jerked me to my feet, keeping my arms and hands pinned behind my back. I had a little more room to maneuver than I had on the ground, but not quite enough to break free. Slowly, he began trying to make me walk back toward the direction I'd come from.

"I am *not* letting you and Sydney risk getting in trouble with me. I'll take care of myself, so just let me go!" I said, literally dragging my feet. Seeing a tall, skinny tree, I stuck one leg out and hooked myself onto the trunk, completely bringing us to a halt.

Dimitri groaned and shifted his grip to get me away from the tree. It almost gave me an escape opportunity, but I didn't even manage two steps before he had a hold of me again.

"Rose," he said wearily. "You can't win."

"How's your face feeling?" I asked. I couldn't see any marks in the poor lighting but knew the punch I'd given him would leave a mark tomorrow. It was a shame to damage his face like that, but he'd heal, and maybe it would teach him a lesson about messing with Rose Hathaway.

Or not. He began dragging me again. "I'm seconds away from just tossing you over my shoulder," he warned.

"I'd like to see you try."

"How do you think Lissa would feel if you got killed?" His grip tightened, and while I had a feeling he'd make good on his over-the-shoulder threat, I also suspected he wanted to shake me. He was that upset. "Can you imagine what it would do to her if she lost you?"

For a moment, I was out of snappy retorts. I didn't want to die, but risking my life was exactly that: risking *my* life. No one else's. Still, I knew he was right. Lissa would be devastated if anything happened to me. And yet . . . it was a risk I had to take.

"Have a little faith, comrade. I won't get killed," I said stubbornly. "I'll stay alive."

Not the answer he'd wanted. He shifted his hold. "There are other ways to help her than whatever insanity you're thinking of."

I suddenly went limp. Dimitri stumbled, caught by surprise at my sudden lack of resistance. "What's wrong?" he asked, both puzzled and suspicious.

I stared off into the night, my eyes not really focused on anything. Instead, I was seeing Lissa and Abe back at Court, remembering Lissa's feeling of powerlessness and longing for her vote. Tatiana's note came back to me, and for a moment, I could hear her voice in my head. *She is not the last Dragomir. Another lives.*

"You're right," I said at last.

"Right about . . . ?" Dimitri was at a total loss. It was a common reaction for people when I agreed to something reasonable.

"Rushing back to Court won't help Lissa."

Silence. I couldn't fully make out his expression, but it was probably filled with shock.

"I'll go back to the motel with you, and I won't go running off to Court." Another Dragomir. Another Dragomir needing to be found. I took a deep breath. "But I'm not going to sit around and do nothing. I *am* going to do something for Lissa—and you and Sydney are going to help me."

EIGHT

IT TURNED OUT I WAS wrong about the local police department comprising of one guy and a dog. When Dimitri and I walked back to the motel, we saw flashing red and blue lights in the parking lot and a few bystanders trying to see what was happening.

"The whole town turned out," I said.

Dimitri sighed. "You just had to say something to the desk clerk, didn't you?"

We'd stopped some distance away, hidden in the shadow of a run-down building. "I thought it would slow you down."

"It's going to slow us down now." His eyes did a sweep of the scene, taking in all the details in the flickering light. "Sydney's car is gone. That's something, at least."

My earlier cockiness faded. "Is it? We just lost our ride!"

"She wouldn't leave us, but she was smart enough to get out before the police came knocking on her door." He turned and surveyed the town's one main road. "Come on. She has to be close, and there's a good chance the police might actually start searching around if they thought some defenseless girl was being chased down." The tone he used for "defenseless" spoke legions.

Dimitri made an executive decision to walk back toward the road that had led us into town, assuming Sydney would want to get out of there now that I'd blown our cover. Getting the police involved had created complications, but I felt little regret over what I'd done. I was excited about the plan that had occurred to me in the woods and wanted, as usual, to get moving on it right away. If I'd helped get us out of this hole of a town, so much the better.

Dimitri's instincts about Sydney were right. About a half-mile outside of town, we spotted a CR-V pulled off on the road's shoulder. The engine was off, the lights dark, but I could see well enough to identify the Louisiana plates. I walked over to the driver side window and knocked on the glass. Inside, Sydney flinched. She rolled down the window, face incredulous.

"What did you do? Never mind. Don't bother. Just get in."

Dimitri and I complied. I felt like a naughty child under her disapproving glare. She started the car without a word and began driving in the direction we'd originally come from, eventually merging with the small state highway that led back to the interstate. That was promising. Only, once we'd driven a few miles, she pulled off again, this time at a dark exit that didn't seem to have anything at it.

She turned off the car and turned to peer at me in the backseat. "You ran, didn't you?"

"Yeah, but I got this—"

Sydney held up a hand to silence me. "No, don't. Not yet. I wish you could have pulled off your daring escape without attracting the authorities."

"Me too," said Dimitri.

I scowled at them both. "Hey, I came back, didn't I?" Dimitri arched an eyebrow at that, apparently questioning just how voluntary that had been. "And now I know what we have to do to help Lissa."

"What we have to do," said Sydney, "is find a safe place to stay."

"Just go back to civilization and pick a hotel. One with room service. We can make that our base of operation while we work on the next plan."

"We researched that town specifically!" she said. "We can't go to some random place—at least not nearby. I doubt they took down my plates, but they could put out a call to look for this kind of car. If they've got that and our descriptions, and it gets to the state police, it'll get to the Alchemists and then it'll—"

"Calm down," said Dimitri, touching her arm. There was nothing intimate about that, but I still felt a spark of envy, particularly after the tough love I'd just had being nearly dragged through the woods. "We don't know that any of that's going to happen. Why don't you just call Abe?"

"Yeah," she said glumly. "That's exactly what I want. To tell him I messed up the plan in less than twenty-four hours."

"Well," I said, "if it makes you feel better, the plan's about to change anyway —"

"Be quiet," she snapped. "Both of you. I need to think."

Dimitri and I exchanged glances, but stayed silent. When I'd told him I knew a way to seriously help Lissa, he'd been intrigued. I knew he wanted details now, but we both had to wait for Sydney.

She flipped on the dome light and produced a paper map of the state. After studying it for a minute, she folded it back up and simply stared ahead. I couldn't see her face but suspected she was frowning. Finally, she sighed in that woeful way of hers, turned off the light, and started the car. I watched as she punched in *Altswood, West Virginia* into her GPS.

"What's in Altswood?" I asked, disappointed she hadn't entered something like *Atlantic City*.

"Nothing," she said, pulling back onto the road. "But it's the closest place to where we're going that the GPS can find."

A passing car's headlights briefly illuminated Dimitri's profile, and I saw curiosity on his face too. So. I wasn't the only one out of the loop anymore. The GPS read almost an hour and a half to our destination. He didn't question her choice, though, and turned back to me.

"So what's going on with Lissa? What's this great plan of yours?" He glanced at Sydney. "Rose says there's something important we have to do."

"So I gathered," said Sydney dryly. Dimitri looked back at me expectantly.

I took a deep breath. It was time to reveal the secret I'd been holding since my hearing. "So, it, um, turns out Lissa has a brother or sister. And I think we should find them."

I managed to sound cool and casual as I spoke. Inside me, my heart lurched. Even though I'd had plenty of time to process Tatiana's note, saying the words out loud made them *real* in a way they hadn't been before. It shocked me, hitting me with the full impact of what this information truly meant and how it changed everything we'd all come to believe.

Of course, my shock was nothing compared to the others'. Score one for Rose and the element of surprise. Sydney made no attempt to hide her astonishment and gasped. Even Dimitri seemed a little taken aback.

Once they recovered, I could see them preparing their protests. They would either demand evidence or simply dismiss the idea as ridiculous. I immediately jumped into action before the arguments could start. I produced Tatiana's note, reading it aloud and then letting Dimitri look at it. I told them about my ghostly encounter, where the queen's troubled spirit made me believe there was truth to this. Nonetheless, my companions were skeptical.

"You have no proof Tatiana wrote the note," said Dimitri.

"The Alchemists have no records of another Dragomir," said Sydney.

They each said exactly what I thought they would. Dimitri was the kind of guy always ready for a trick or trap. He suspected anything without hard proof. Sydney lived in a world of facts and data and had total faith in the Alchemists and their information. If the Alchemists didn't believe it, neither did she. Ghostly evidence didn't convince either of them.

"I don't really see why Tatiana's spirit would want to deceive me," I argued. "And the Alchemists aren't all-knowing. The note says this is a pretty heavily guarded secret from Moroi—it makes sense it would be secret from the Alchemists too."

Sydney scoffed, not liking my "all-knowing" comment, but otherwise remained silent. It was Dimitri who pushed forward, refusing to take anything on faith without more evidence.

"You've said before that it's not always clear what the ghosts are trying to say," he pointed out. "Maybe you misread her."

"I don't know . . ." I thought again about her solemn, translucent face. "I think she did write this note. My gut says she did." I narrowed my eyes. "You know it's been right before. Can you trust me on this?"

He stared at me for several moments, and I held that gaze steadily. In that uncanny way of ours, I could guess what was going on. The whole situation was far-fetched, but he knew I was right about my instincts. They'd proven true in the past. No matter what he'd been through, no matter the current antagonism between us, he still knew me enough to trust in this.

Slowly, almost reluctantly, he nodded. "But if we decided to search for this alleged sibling, we'd be going against Lissa's instructions to stay put."

"You believe that note?" exclaimed Sydney. "You're *considering* listening to it?"

A flash of anger lit up within me, one I worked to hide. Of course. Of course this would be the next obstacle: Dimitri's inability to disobey Lissa. Sydney feared Abe, which I could kind of understand, but Dimitri's concern was still the lofty vow of chivalry he'd made to Lissa. I took a deep breath. Telling him how ridiculous I thought he was behaving wouldn't accomplish what I needed.

"Technically, yes. But if we could actually prove she wasn't the last in her

family, it would help her a lot. We can't ignore the chance, and if you manage to keep me out of trouble while we do it"—I tried not to grimace at that —"then there shouldn't be a problem."

Dimitri considered this. He knew me. He also knew I would use roundabout logic if need be to get my way.

"Okay," he said at last. I saw the shift in his features. The decision was made, and he'd stick to it now. "But where do we start? You have no other clues, aside from a mysterious note."

It was déjà vu and reminded me of Lissa and Christian's earlier conversation with Abe when they were figuring out where to start their investigation. She and I lived parallel lives, it seemed, both pursuing an impossible puzzle with a sketchy trail. As I replayed their discussion, I attempted the same reasoning Abe had used: without clues, start working through obvious conclusions.

"Obviously, this is a secret," I said. "A big one. One people have apparently wanted to cover up—enough that they'd try to steal records about it and keep the Dragomirs out of power." Someone had broken into an Alchemist building and taken papers indicating Eric Dragomir had indeed been funding a mystery woman. I pointed out to my companions that it seemed very likely to me this woman was the mother of his love child. "You could look into that case some more." Those last words were spoken toward Sydney. Maybe she didn't care about another Dragomir, but the Alchemists still wanted to know who had stolen from them.

"Whoa, hey. How was I not even part of this decision process? " She still hadn't recovered from our conversation suddenly running away without her. After the way our night had gone so far, she didn't look too pleased about being sucked into another of my rogue schemes. "Maybe breaking Lissa's orders is no big deal for you two, but *I'd* be going against Abe. He might not be so lenient."

It was a fair point. "I'll pull in a daughterly favor," I assured her. "Besides, the old man *loves* secrets. He'd be into this, believe me. And you've already found the biggest clue of all. I mean, if Eric was giving money to some anonymous woman, then why wouldn't it be for his secret mistress and child?"

"Anonymous is the key word," Sydney said, still clearly skeptical of *Zmey*'s "leniency." "If your theory's right—and it's kind of a leap—we still have no idea who this mistress is. The stolen documents didn't say."

"Are there other records that tie into the stolen ones? Or could you investigate the bank he was sending money to?" The Alchemists' initial concern had simply been that someone had stolen hard copies of their records. Her colleagues had discovered which items were taken but hadn't given much thought to the content. I was willing to bet they hadn't searched for any other documents related to the same topic. She affirmed as much.

"You really have no idea how ‘researching records' works, do you? It's not that easy," she said. "It could take a while."

"Well . . . I guess that's why it's good we're going somewhere, um, secure, right?" I asked. Struck with the realization that we might need time to put our next step together, I could kind of see the disadvantage of having lost our out-of-the-way hideout.

"Secure . . ." She shook her head. "Well, we'll see. I hope I'm not doing

something stupid."

With those ominous words, silence fell. I wanted to know more about where we were going but felt I shouldn't push the small victory I'd made. The victory I thought I'd made, at least. I wasn't entirely sure Sydney was 100 percent on board but felt certain Dimitri had been convinced. Best not to agitate her right now. I looked at the GPS. Almost an hour. Enough time to check back on Lissa.

It took me a minute to recognize where Lissa was, probably because I'd been expecting her to return to her room. But no, she was in a location I'd only been once: Adrian's parents' home. Surprising. In a few moments, though, I read the reasoning from her mind. Her current suite was in guest housing, and in the ensuing panic over my escape, her building was swarming with visitors now trying to leave. The Ivashkov townhouse, situated in a permanent residential area, was a bit quieter—not that there weren't a few fleeing neighbors there too.

Adrian sat back in an armchair, feet carelessly resting on an expensive coffee table that some interior designer had probably helped his mother choose. Lissa and Christian had just arrived, and she caught a whiff of smoke in the air that made her think Adrian had been sneaking in some bad behavior beforehand.

"If we're lucky," he was telling Lissa and Christian, "the parental units will be tied up for a while and give us some peace and quiet. How rough was your questioning?"

Lissa and Christian sat on a couch that was prettier than it was comfortable. She leaned into him and sighed. "Not so bad. I don't know if they're fully convinced we had nothing to do with Rose's escape . . . but they definitely don't have any proof."

"I think we got in more trouble with Aunt Tasha," said Christian. "She was kind of pissed off that we didn't tell her what was going on. I think she probably wanted to blow up the statues herself."

"I think she's more upset that we got Dimitri involved" pointed out Lissa. "She thinks we screwed up his chances of ever being accepted again."

"She's right," said Adrian. He picked up a remote control and turned on a large, plasma screen TV. He muted the sound and flipped randomly through channels. "But no one forced him."

Lissa nodded but secretly wondered if she had forced Dimitri inadvertently. His dedicated vow to protect her was no secret. Christian seemed to pick up on her worry.

"Hey, for all we know, he never would have—"

A knock interrupted him.

"Damn," said Adrian, standing up. "So much for peace and quiet."

"Your parents wouldn't knock," said Christian.

"True, but it's probably one of their friends wanting to sip port and gossip about the terrible state of today's murderous youth," Adrian called back.

Lissa heard the door open and a muffled conversation. A few moments later, Adrian returned with a young Moroi guy that Lissa didn't recognize.

"Look," the guy was saying, glancing around uneasily, "I can come back." He caught sight of Lissa and Christian and froze.

"No, no," said Adrian. His transformation from grumpy to cordial had happened as quickly as a light switch being flipped. "I'm sure she'll be back any minute. Do you guys all know each other?"

The guy nodded, eyes darting from face to face. "Of course."

Lissa frowned. "I don't know you."

The smile never left Adrian's face, but Lissa picked up quickly that something important was going on. "This is Joe. Joe's the janitor who helped me out by testifying that I wasn't with Rose when Aunt Tatiana was murdered. The one who was working in Rose's building."

Both Lissa and Christian straightened up. "It was a lucky thing you turned up before the hearing," said Christian carefully. For a while, there'd been panic that Adrian might be implicated with me, but Joe had come forward just in time to testify about when he'd seen both me and Adrian in my building.

Joe took a few steps back toward the foyer. "I really should go. Just tell Lady Ivashkov that I came by—and that I'm leaving Court. But that everything's set."

"What's set?" asked Lissa, slowly standing up.

"She—she'll know." Lissa, I knew, didn't look intimidating. She was cute and slim and pretty, but from the fear on Joe's face—well. She must have been giving him a scary look. It reminded me of the earlier encounter with Abe. "Really," he added. "I need to go."

He started to move again, but suddenly, I felt a surge of spirit burn through Lissa. Joe came to a halt, and she strode toward him.

"What did you need to talk to Lady Ivashkov about?" demanded Lissa.

"Easy, cousin," murmured Adrian. "You don't need that much spirit to get answers."

Lissa was using compulsion on Joe, so much that he might as well have been a puppet on strings.

"The money," Joe gasped, eyes wide. "The money's set."

"What money?" she asked.

Joe hesitated, as though he might resist, but soon gave in. He couldn't fight that much compulsion, not from a spirit user. "The money . . . the money to testify . . . about where *he* was." Joe jerked his head toward Adrian.

Adrian's cool expression faltered a little. "What do you mean where I was? The night my aunt died? Are you saying . . ."

Christian picked up where Adrian couldn't. "Is Lady Ivashkov paying you off to say you saw Adrian?"

"I *did* see him," cried Joe. He was visibly sweating. Adrian had been right: Lissa was using too much spirit. It was physically hurting Joe. "I just . . . I just . . . I don't remember the time . . . I don't remember any of the times. That's what I told the other guy, too. She paid me to put a time on when you were there."

Adrian didn't like that, not at all. To his credit, he remained calm. "What do you mean you told 'the other guy'?"

"Who else?" repeated Lissa. "Who else was with her?"

"No one! Lady Ivashkov just wanted to make sure her son was clear. I fudged the details for her. It was the guy . . . the other guy who came later . . . who wanted to know when Hathaway was around."

There was a click from the foyer, the sound of the front door opening. Lissa leaned forward, cranking up the compulsion. "Who? Who was he? What did he want?"

Joe looked like he was in serious pain now. He swallowed. "I don't know who he was! No one I'd seen. Some Moroi. Just wanted me to testify about when I'd seen Hathaway. Paid me more than Lady Ivashkov. No harm . . ." He looked at Lissa desperately. "No harm in helping them both . . . especially since Hathaway did it . . ."

"Adrian?" Daniella's voice rang down the hall. "Are you here?"

"Back off," Adrian warned Lissa in a low voice. There was no joking in it.

Her voice was just as soft, her attention still on Joe. "What did he look like? The Moroi? Describe him."

The sound of high heels clicked on the hall's wooden floor.

"Like no one!" said Joe. "I swear! Plain. Ordinary. Except the hand . . . please let me go . . ."

Adrian shoved Lissa aside, breaking the contact between her and Joe. Joe nearly sagged to the ground and then went rigid as he locked gazes with Adrian. More compulsion—but much less than Lissa had used.

"Forget this," hissed Adrian. "We never had this conversation."

"Adrian, what are you—"

Daniella stopped in the living room's doorway, taking in the strange sights. Christian was still on the couch, but Adrian and Lissa were inches from Joe, whose shirt was soaked with sweat.

"What's going on?" Daniella exclaimed.

Adrian stepped back and gave his mother one of those charming smiles that captivated so many women. "This guy came by to see you, Mom. We told him we'd wait until you got back. We're going to head out now."

Daniella glanced between her son and Joe. She was clearly uneasy about the scenario and also confused. Lissa was surprised at the "heading out" comment but followed Adrian's lead. Christian did too.

"It was nice seeing you," said Lissa, attempting a smile to match Adrian's. Joe looked totally dazed. After Adrian's last command, the poor janitor had also probably forgotten how he'd ended up at the Ivashkov home.

Lissa and Christian hastily followed Adrian out before Daniella could say much more. "What the hell was that?" asked Christian, once they were outside. I wasn't sure if he meant Lissa's scary compulsion or what Joe had revealed.

"Not sure," said Adrian, expression dark. No more cheery smile. "But we should talk to Mikhail."

"Rose."

Dimitri's voice was gentle, bringing me back to him, Sydney, and the car. He'd undoubtedly recognized the expression on my face and knew where I'd been.

"Everything okay back there?" he asked.

I knew "back there" meant Court and not the backseat. I nodded, though "okay" wasn't quite the right word for what I'd just witnessed. What *had* I just witnessed? An admission of false testimony. An admission that contradicted some of the evidence against me. I didn't care so much that Joe had lied to keep Adrian safe. Adrian hadn't been involved with Tatiana's murder. I wanted

him free and clear. But what about the other part? Some "ordinary" Moroi who'd paid Joe to lie about when I'd been around, leaving me without an alibi during the murder window?

Before I could fully process the implications, I noticed the car had stopped. Forcing the Joe-info to the back of my mind, I tried to take stock of our new situation. Sydney's laptop glowed in the front seat as she scrolled through something.

"Where are we?" I peered out the window. In the headlights, I saw a sad, closed gas station.

"Altswood," said Dimitri.

By my estimation, there was nothing else but the gas station. "Makes our last town look like New York."

Sydney shut her laptop. She handed it back, and I set it on the seat beside me, near the backpacks she'd miraculously grabbed when leaving the motel. She shifted the car into drive and pulled out of the parking lot. Not too far away, I could see the highway and expected her to turn toward it. Instead, she drove past the gas station, deeper into darkness. Like the last place, we were surrounded by mountains and forests. We crept along at a snail's pace until Sydney spotted a tiny gravel road disappearing into the woods. It was only big enough for one car to go down, but somehow, I didn't expect we'd run into much traffic out here. A similar road took us in deeper and deeper, and although I couldn't see her face, Sydney's anxiety was palpable in the car.

Minutes felt like hours until our narrow path opened up into a large, dirt-packed clearing. Other vehicles—pretty old looking—were parked there. It was a strange place for a parking lot, considering all I could see around us was dark forest. Sydney shut off the car.

"Are we at a campground?" I asked.

She didn't answer. Instead, she looked at Dimitri. "Are you as good as they say you are?"

"What?" he asked, startled.

"Fighting. Everyone keeps talking about how dangerous you are. Is it true? Are you that good?"

Dimitri considered. "Pretty good."

I scoffed. "*Very* good."

"I hope it's enough," said Sydney, reaching for the door's handle.

I opened my door as well. "Aren't you going to ask about me?"

"I already know you're dangerous," she said. "I've seen it."

Her compliment offered little comfort as we walked out across the rural parking lot. "Why'd we stop?"

"Because we have to go on foot now." She turned on a flashlight and shone it along the lot's perimeter. At last, it flickered across a footpath snaking through the trees. The path was small and easy to miss because weeds and other plants were encroaching on it. "There." She began to move toward it.

"Wait," said Dimitri. He moved in front of her, leading the way, and I immediately took up the back position in our group. It was a standard guardian formation. We were flanking her the way we would a Moroi. All earlier thoughts of Lissa flitted from my mind. My attention was totally on the situation at hand, all my senses alert to the potential danger. I could see

Dimitri was in the same mode, both of us holding our stakes.

"Where are we going?" I asked as we carefully avoided roots and holes along the path. Branches scraped along my arms.

"To people I guarantee won't turn you in," she said, voice grim.

More questions were on my lips when brilliant light suddenly blinded me. My eyes had grown attuned to the darkness, and the unexpected brightness was too abrupt a change. There was a rustling in the trees, a sense of many bodies around us, and as my vision returned, I saw vampire faces everywhere.

NINE

FORTUNATELY, THEY WERE MOROI FACES.

That didn't stop me from raising my stake and moving closer to Sydney. No one was attacking us, so I held my position—not that it probably mattered. As I took in more and more of the setting, I saw that we were completely surrounded by about ten people. We'd told Sydney we were good, and it was true: Dimitri and I could probably take out a group like this, though the poor fighting quarters would make it difficult. I also realized the group wasn't entirely Moroi. The ones closest to us were, but around them were dhampirs. And the light I'd thought had come from torches or flashlights was actually coming from a ball of flame held in one of the Moroi's hands.

One Moroi man stepped forward, about Abe's age, with a bushy brown beard and a silver stake in his hand. Some part of me noted the stake was crudely made compared to mine, but the point held the same threat. The man's gaze passed over me and Dimitri, and the stake lowered. Sydney became the object of the guy's scrutiny, and he suddenly reached out for her. Dimitri and I moved to stop him, but other hands reached out to stop *us*. I could have fought them but froze when Sydney let out a strangled, "Wait."

The bearded Moroi gripped her chin and turned her head so that the light fell on her cheek, lighting up the golden tattoo. He released his hold and stepped back.

"Lily-girl," he grunted.

The others relaxed very slightly, though they kept their stakes poised and still looked ready to attack if provoked. The Moroi leader turned his attention from Sydney to Dimitri and me.

"You're here to join us?" he asked warily.

"We need shelter," said Sydney, lightly touching her throat. "They're being chased by—by the Tainted."

The woman holding the flame looked skeptical. "More like spies for the Tainted."

"The Tainted Queen is dead," said Sydney. She nodded toward me. "They think she did it."

The inquisitive part of me started to speak but promptly shut up, wise enough to know this bizarre turn of events was best left in Sydney's hands. I didn't understand what she was saying. When she'd said Tainted were pursuing us, I thought she was trying to make this group think we had Strigoi after us. Now, after she'd mentioned the queen, I wasn't so sure. I also wasn't

so sure identifying me as a potential murderer was that smart. For all I knew, Brown Beard would turn me in and try to score a reward. From the looks of his clothes, he could have used one.

To my surprise, this brought a smile to his face. "And so, another usurper passes on. Is there a new one yet?"

"No," said Sydney. "They'll have elections soon and choose."

The group's smiles were replaced by looks of disdain and disapproving mutters about elections. I couldn't help myself. "How else would they choose a new king or queen?"

"In the true way," said a nearby dhampir. "The way it used to be, long ago. In a battle to the death."

I waited for the punch line, but the guy was clearly serious. I wanted to ask Sydney what she'd gotten us into, but by this point, we'd apparently passed inspection. Their leader turned and began walking down the path. The group followed, moving us along as they did. Listening to their conversation, I couldn't help a small frown—and not just because our lives might be on the line. I was intrigued by their accents. The motel's desk clerk had had a thick southern accent, exactly like you'd expect in this part of the country. These guys, while sounding similar, had a few other pronunciations mixed in. It almost reminded me a little of Dimitri's accent.

I was so tense and anxious that I could hardly focus on how long we walked. Eventually, the path led us to what seemed like a well-hidden campground. A huge bonfire blazed in a clearing with people sitting around. Yet, there were structures scattered off to one side, stretching into the woods along the now widened path. It wasn't quite a road yet, but it gave the illusion of a town, or at least a village. The buildings were small and shabby but appeared permanent. On the other side of the fire, the land rose sharply into the Appalachians, blocking out the stars. In the flickering light, I could see a mountain's face that was textured with rough stone and scattered trees, dotted here and there with dark holes.

My attention moved back to the living. The crowd gathered around the fire —a couple dozen or so—fell silent as our escort led us in. At first, all I saw were numbers. That was the warrior in me, counting opponents and planning for attack. Then, just like I had earlier, I truly took in the faces. More Moroi mixed with dhampirs. And—I was shocked to discover—humans.

These weren't feeders either. Well, not in the sense that I knew feeders. Even in the dark, I could see glimpses of bite marks along some of the humans' necks, but judging by their curious expressions, I could tell these people didn't give blood regularly. They weren't high. They were mixed in among the Moroi and dhampirs, sitting, standing, talking, engaging—the whole group clearly unified in some kind of community. I wondered if these humans were like the Alchemists. Maybe they had some sort of a business relationship with my kind.

The tight formation around us began to spread out, and I moved closer to Sydney. "What in God's name is all this?"

"The Keepers," she said in a low voice.

"Keepers? What does that mean?"

"It means," said the bearded Moroi, "that unlike your people, we still keep the old ways, the way we truly should."

I eyed these "Keepers" in their worn clothes and the dirty, barefoot children. Reflecting upon how far we were from civilization—and based on how dark it was away from the fire—I was willing to bet they didn't have electricity. I was on the verge of saying that I didn't think this was how anyone should truly be living. Then, remembering the casual way these people had spoken about fights to the death, I decided to keep my views to myself.

"Why are they here, Raymond?" asked a woman sitting by the fire. She was human but spoke to the bearded Moroi in a perfectly ordinary and familiar way. It wasn't the dreamy manner a feeder usually used with a Moroi. It wasn't even like the stilted conversations my kind had with the Alchemists. "Are they joining us?"

Raymond shook his head. "No. The Tainted are after them for killing their queen."

Sydney elbowed me before I could deny the claim. I clenched my teeth, waiting to be mobbed. Instead, I was surprised to find the crowd looking at me with a mix of awe and admiration, just as our welcoming party had.

"We're giving them refuge," explained Raymond. He beamed at us, though I didn't know if his approval came from us being murderers or if he simply liked the attention he was getting. "Although, you *are* welcome to join us and live here. We have room in the caves."

Caves? I jerked my head toward the cliffs beyond the fire, realizing now what those black holes were. Even as I watched, a few people retiring for the night crawled off and disappeared into the dark depths of the mountain.

Sydney answered while I worked to keep a look of horror off my face. "We only need to stay here . . ." She faltered, not surprising considering how sketchy our plans had become. "A couple days, probably."

"You can stay with my family," said Raymond. "Even you." That was directed toward Sydney, and he made it sound like quite the favor.

"Thank you," she said. "We'd be grateful to spend the night at your *house*." The emphasis on the last word was for me, I realized. The wooden structures along the dusty path didn't look luxurious by any stretch of the imagination, but I'd take one over a cave any day.

The village or commune or whatever was getting increasingly excited as our novelty sank in. They bombarded us with a flurry of questions, starting with ordinary things like our names but moving quickly on to specific details about how exactly I'd killed Tatiana.

I was saved from having to answer when the human woman who had spoken to Raymond earlier jumped up and steered my threesome away. "Enough," she said, chastising the others. "It's getting late, and I'm sure our guests are hungry."

I was starving, actually, but didn't know if I was in dire enough straits to eat opossum stew or whatever passed as food around here. The woman's proclamation was met with some disappointment, but she assured the others they could talk to us tomorrow. Glancing around, I saw a faint purpling of what must have been the eastern sky. Sunrise. A group of Moroi clinging to "traditional" ways would most certainly run on a nocturnal schedule, meaning these people probably only had a few more hours before bedtime.

The woman said her name was Sarah and led us down the dusty path.

Raymond called that he'd see us soon. As we walked, we saw other people wandering near scattered, ramshackle homes, on their way to bed or possibly woken up with all the commotion. Sarah glanced over at Sydney.

"Did you bring us anything?"

"No," said Sydney. "I'm just here to escort them."

Sarah looked disappointed but nodded. "An important task."

Sydney frowned and appeared even more uneasy. "How long has it been since my people brought you anything?"

"A few months," said Sarah after a moment's thought.

Sydney's expression darkened at this, but she said no more.

Sarah finally took us inside one of the larger and nicer looking of the houses, though it was still plain and made of unpainted wooden boards. The inside was pitch black, and we waited as Sarah lit old-fashioned lanterns. I'd been right. No electricity. This suddenly made me wonder about plumbing.

The floors were hardwood like the walls and covered in large, brightly patterned rugs. We appeared to be in some hybrid kitchen-living-dining room. There was a large fireplace in the center, a wooden table and chairs on one side, and large cushions on the other that I presumed served as sofas. Racks of drying herbs hung near the fireplace, filling the room with a spicy scent that mingled with the smell of burnt wood. There were three doors in the back wall, and Sarah nodded to one.

"You can sleep in the girls' room," she said.

"Thanks," I said, not sure I really wanted to see what our guest accommodations were like. I was already missing the MOTEL. I studied Sarah curiously. She looked to be about Raymond's age and wore a plain, knee-length blue dress. Her blond hair was pulled back and tied at her neck, and she seemed short to me the way all humans did. "Are you Raymond's housekeeper?" It was the only role I could deduce for her. She had a few bite marks but obviously wasn't a feeder. At least not a full-time one. Maybe around here, feeders doubled as household help.

She smiled. "I'm his wife."

It was a mark of my self-control that I managed any sort of response. "Oh."

Sydney's sharp eyes fell on me, a warning in them: *Let it go*. I again clenched my jaw shut and gave her a brief nod to let her know I understood.

Except, I didn't understand. Dhampirs and Moroi hooked up all the time. Dhampirs had to. More permanent liaisons were scandalous—but not completely out of the realm of possibility.

But Moroi and humans? That was beyond comprehension. Those races hadn't gotten together in centuries. They'd produced dhampirs long ago, but as the modern world progressed, Moroi had completely withdrawn from intermingling (in an intimate way) with humans. We lived among them, sure. Moroi and dhampirs worked alongside humans out in the world, bought houses in their neighborhoods, and apparently had bizarre arrangements with secret societies like the Alchemists. And, of course, Moroi fed from humans—and that was the thing. If you kept a human close to you, it was because they were a feeder. That was your level of intimacy. Feeders were food, pure and simple. Well-treated food, yes, but not food you became friends with. A Moroi having sex with a dhampir? Racy. A Moroi having sex with a dhampir *and*

drinking blood? Dirty and humiliating. A Moroi having sex with a human—with or without blood drinking? Incomprehensible.

There were few things that shocked me or gave me offense. I was pretty liberal in my views when it came to romance, but the idea of human and Moroi marriage blew me away. It didn't matter if the human was a type of feeder—as Sarah appeared to be—or someone "above" that like Sydney. Humans and Moroi didn't get together. It was primitive and wrong, which was why it was no longer done. Well, at least not where I came from.

Unlike your people, we still follow the old ways.

The funny thing was that no matter how wrong I thought all this was, Sydney had to feel even more strongly about it with her vampire hang-ups. I supposed she'd been prepared, however, which is why she could manage that cool expression of hers. She hadn't been blindsided like Dimitri and me, because I felt with some certainty that he shared my feelings. He was just better at hiding surprise.

A commotion at the door startled me out of my shock. Raymond had arrived and wasn't alone. A dhampir boy of about eight or so sat on his shoulders, and a Moroi girl about the same age scurried alongside them. A pretty Moroi woman who looked to be in her twenties followed, and behind her was a cute dhampir guy who couldn't have been more than a couple years older than me, if not exactly my age.

Introductions followed. The children were Phil and Molly, and the Moroi woman was named Paulette. They all appeared to live there, but I couldn't exactly figure out the relationships, except for the guy my age. He was Raymond and Sarah's son, Joshua. He had a ready smile for all of us—especially me and Sydney—and eyes that reminded me of the piercing, crystalline blue of the Ozeras. Only, whereas Christian's family tended to have dark hair, Joshua's was a sandy blond with lighter gold highlights. I had to admit, it was an attractive combination, but that stunned part of my brain reminded me again that he'd been born from a human-Moroi hookup, not a dhampir and Moroi like me. The end product was the same, but the means were bizarre.

"I'm putting them in your room," Sarah told Paulette. "The rest of you can share the loft."

It took me a moment to realize "the rest of you" meant Paulette, Joshua, Molly, and Phil. Glancing up, I saw there was indeed what looked like a loft space covering half the house's width. It didn't look big enough for four people.

"We don't want to inconvenience you," said Dimitri, sharing my thoughts. He'd been silent for almost all of this wood-land adventure, saving his energy for actions, not words. "We'll be fine out here."

"Don't worry about it," said Joshua, again giving me that pretty smile. "We don't mind. Angeline won't either."

"Who?" I asked.

"My sister."

I repressed a grimace. Five of them crammed up there so that we could have a room. "Thank you," said Sydney. "We appreciate it. And we really won't be staying long." Their dislike of the vampire world aside, Alchemists could be

polite and charming when they chose.

"Too bad," said Joshua.

"Stop flirting, Josh," said Sarah. "Do you three want something to eat before bed? I could warm up some stew. We had it earlier with some of Paulette's bread."

At the word *stew*, all my opossum fears came racing back. "No need," I said hastily. "I'd just be fine with bread."

"Me too," said Dimitri. I wondered if he was trying to reduce their work or if he shared my food fears. Probably not the latter. Dimitri seemed like the kind of guy you could throw into the wilderness and he would survive off anything.

Paulette had apparently baked a lot of bread, and they let us have a picnic in our small little room with a full loaf and a bowl of butter that Sarah had probably churned herself. The room was about the size of my dorm room at St. Vladimir's, with two down stuffed mattresses on the floor. Quilts neatly covered them, quilts that probably hadn't been used in months with these temperatures. Munching on a piece of bread that was surprisingly good, I ran my hand over one of the quilts.

"It reminds me of some of the designs I saw in Russia," I said.

Dimitri studied the pattern too. "Similar. But not quite the same."

"It's the evolution of the culture," said Sydney. She was tired but not enough to abandon textbook mode. "Traditional Russian patterns brought over and eventually fused with a typical Americana patchwork quilt form."

Whoa. "Um, good to know." The family had left us alone while they got ready for bed, and I eyed our cracked door warily. With the noise and activity out there, it seemed unlikely we'd be overheard, but I lowered my voice anyway. "Are you ready to explain who the hell these people are?"

She shrugged. "The Keepers."

"Yeah, I got that. And we're the Tainted. Sounds like a better name for Strigoi."

"No." Sydney leaned back against the wooden wall. "Strigoi are the Lost. You're Tainted because you joined the modern world and left behind their backward ways for your own messed up customs."

"Hey," I retorted. "We're not the ones with overalls and banjos."

"Rose," chastised Dimitri, with a pointed look at the door. "Be careful. And besides, we only saw one person in overalls."

"If it makes you feel better," said Sydney, "I think your ways are better. Seeing humans mixing with all this . . ." The pleasant and professional face she had shown to the Keepers was gone. Her blunt nature was back. "It's disgusting. No offense."

"None taken," I said with a shiver. "Trust me, I feel the same way. I can't believe . . . I can't believe they live like that."

She nodded, seeming grateful I shared her view. "I like you guys sticking with your own kind better. Except . . ."

"Except what?" I prodded.

She looked sheepish. "Even if the people you come from don't marry humans, you do still interact with them and live in their cities. These guys don't."

"Which Alchemists prefer," guessed Dimitri. "You don't approve of this

group's customs, but you do like having them conveniently stashed out of mainstream society."

Sydney nodded. "The more vampires who stay off on their own in the woods, the better—even if their lifestyle is crazy. These guys keep to themselves—and keep others out."

"Through hostile means?" I asked. We'd been met by a war party, and she'd expected it. All of them had been ready to fight: Moroi, dhampir, and human.

"Hopefully not too hostile," she said evasively.

"They let you through," said Dimitri. "They know the Alchemists. Why did Sarah ask about you bringing them things?"

"Because that's what we do," she said. "Every so often for groups like these, we drop off supplies—food for everyone, medicine for the humans." Again, I heard that derision in her voice, but then she turned uneasy. "The thing is, if Sarah's right, they could be due for an Alchemist visit. That would just be our luck to be here when that happens."

I was going to reassure her that we only needed to lie low a couple days when an earlier phrase tugged at me. "Wait. You said ‘groups like these.' How many of these commune things are out there?" I turned to Dimitri. "This isn't like the Alchemists, is it? Something only some of you know about that you're keeping from the rest of us?"

He shook his head. "I'm as astonished by all of this as you are."

"Some of your leaders probably know about the Keepers in a vague way," said Sydney. "But no details. No locations. These guys hide themselves pretty well and can move on a moment's notice. They stay away from your people. They don't like your people."

I sighed. "Which is why they won't turn us in. And why they're so excited I might have killed Tatiana. Thanks for that, by the way."

Sydney wasn't apologetic in the least. "It gets us protection. Such as it is." She stifled a yawn. "But for now? I'm exhausted. I'm not going to be able to follow anyone's crazy plans—yours or Abe's—if I don't get some sleep."

I'd known she was tired, but only now did the extent of it hit me. Sydney wasn't like us. We needed sleep but had the endurance to put it off if needed. She'd been up all night and forced into some situations that were definitely outside of her comfort zone. She looked like she could fall asleep against the wall then and there. I turned to Dimitri. He was already looking at me.

"Shifts?" I asked. I knew neither one of us would allow our group to stay unguarded in this place, even if we were allegedly queen-killing heroes.

He nodded. "You go first, and I'll—"

The door was flung open, and both Dimitri and I nearly leapt up to attack. A dhampir girl stood there, glaring at all of us. She was a couple years younger than me, about the age of my friend Jill Mastrano, a student back at St. Vladimir's who wanted to be a Moroi fighter. This girl looked like she did too, just by her stance alone. She possessed the strong, lean build most dhampirs had, her whole body braced like it might tackle any one of us. Her hair was stick-straight to her waist, a dark auburn that had picked up gold and copper highlights from the sun. She had the same blue eyes as Joshua.

"So," she said. "You're the big heroes taking my room."

"Angeline?" I guessed, remembering Joshua mentioning his sister.

She narrowed her eyes, not liking that I knew who she was. "Yes." She studied me unflinchingly and didn't seem to approve of what she found. That sharp gaze flicked to Dimitri next. I expected a softening, expected her to fall prey to his good looks the way most women did. But, no. He received suspicion as well. Her attention turned back to me.

"I don't believe it," she declared. "You're too soft. Too prim."

Prim? Really? I didn't feel that way, not in my battle-scarred jeans and T-shirt. Looking at her attire, I could maybe understand the attitude, though. Her clothes were clean, but her jeans had been around a while, both knees worn to threads. The shirt was a plain, off-white tank top that had a homemade feel. I didn't know if it had originally been white. Maybe I was prim by comparison. Of course, if anyone deserved the title of prim, it would be Sydney. Her clothes would've passed at a business meeting, and she hadn't been in any fights or jail-breaks recently.

Angeline hadn't even given her a second glance, though. I was getting the feeling Alchemists were in a strange category around here, a different type of human from the ones who intermarried with the Keepers. Alchemists brought supplies and left. They were almost a type of feeder to these people, really, which boggled the mind. The Keepers had more respect for the types of humans my culture looked down on.

Regardless, I didn't know what to say to Angeline. I didn't like being called soft or having my battle prowess called into question. A spark of my temper flared, but I refused to cause trouble by getting in a fight with our host's daughter, nor was I going to start making up details about Tatiana's murder. I simply shrugged.

"Looks are deceiving," I said.

"Yes," Angeline said coolly. "They are."

She stalked over to a small chest in the corner and pulled out what looked like a nightgown. "You better not mess up my bed," she warned me. She glanced over at Sydney, sitting on the other mattress. "I don't care what you do to Paulette's."

"Is Paulette your sister?" I asked, still trying to put this family together.

There didn't seem to be anything I could say that wouldn't offend this girl. "Of course not," Angeline snapped, slamming the door as she left. I stared at it in astonishment.

Sydney yawned and stretched out on her bed. "Paulette is probably Raymond's . . . eh, I don't know. Mistress. Concubine."

"What?" I exclaimed. A Moroi married to a human and having an affair with a Moroi. I wasn't sure how much more I could take. "Living with his family?"

"Don't ask me to explain it. I don't want to know any more about your twisted ways than I have to."

"It's not *my* way," I retorted.

Sarah came shortly thereafter to apologize for Angeline and see if we needed anything else. We assured her we were fine and thanked her profusely for her hospitality. Once she was gone, Dimitri and I set up sleeping shifts. I would have rather we both stayed on alert, particularly since I felt pretty sure Angeline would slit someone's throat in their sleep. But, we needed rest and knew we'd both react promptly if anyone came busting down our door.

So, I let Dimitri take the first watch while I snuggled into Angeline's bed and tried not to "mess it up." It was surprisingly comfortable. Or, maybe I was just that tired. I was able to let go of my worries about execution, lost siblings, and vampire hillbillies. Deep sleep wrapped around me, and I began to dream . . . but not just any dream. It was a shifting of my inner world, the sense of being both in and out of reality. I was being pulled into a spirit-induced dream.

Adrian!

The thought excited me. I'd missed him and was eager to talk to someone directly after all that had happened at Court. There hadn't been much time to talk during my escape, and after this bizarre backwoods world I'd stumbled into, I really needed some piece of normality and civilization around me.

The dream's world began to form around me, growing clearer and clearer. It was a location I'd never seen, a formal parlor with chairs and couches covered in lavender paisley cushions. Oil paintings lined the walls, and there was a large harp in the corner. I'd learned long ago that there was no predicting where Adrian would send me—or what he'd make me wear. Fortunately, I was in jeans and a T-shirt, my blue *nazar* hanging around my neck.

I turned around anxiously, looking for him so that I could give him a giant hug. Yet, as my eyes searched the room, it wasn't Adrian's face I suddenly found myself looking into.

It was Robert Doru's.

And Victor Dashkov was with him.

TEN

WHEN YOUR BOYFRIEND IS A dream-walker, you pick up a few lessons. One of the most important is that doing physical things in dreams feels exactly like doing them in the real world. Say, like kissing someone. Adrian and I had shared a number of dream-kisses intense enough to spark my body wanting to try a whole lot more. Although I'd never actually attacked someone in a dream, I was willing to bet a punch here would feel just as painful as a real one.

Without hesitation, I lunged toward Victor, uncertain as to whether I should sock him or choke him. Both seemed like good ideas. Turned out, I did neither. Before I could reach him, I slammed into an invisible wall—hard. It both blocked me from him and bounced me back at the impact. I stumbled, tried to regain my footing, but instead landed painfully on the ground. Yup—dreams felt just like real life.

I glared at Robert, feeling a mix of both anger and uneasiness. I tried to hide that last emotion. "You're a spirit user with telekinesis?"

We'd known that was possible, but it was a skill neither Lissa nor Adrian had mastered yet. I really didn't like the idea that Robert might have the power to throw objects around and create invisible barriers. It was a disadvantage we didn't need. Robert remained enigmatic. "I control the dream."

Victor was looking down at me with that smug, calculating expression he excelled at. Realizing what an undignified position I was in, I leapt to my feet. I kept a hard stance, my body tense and ready as I wondered if Robert would keep the wall up continuously.

"Are you done with your tantrum?" asked Victor. "Behaving like a civilized person will make our talk so much more pleasant."

"I have no interest in talking to you," I snapped. "The only thing I'm going to do is hunt you down in the real world and drag you back to the authorities."

"Charming," said Victor. "We can share a cell."

I winced.

"Yes," he continued. "I know all about what happened. Poor Tatiana. Such a tragedy. Such a loss."

His mocking, melodramatic tone sparked an alarming idea. "You . . . you didn't have anything to do with it, did you?" Victor's escape from prison had triggered a lot of fear and paranoia amongst the Moroi. They'd been convinced he was coming for them all. Knowing the truth about the escape, I'd dismissed

such talk and figured he'd simply lie low. Now, remembering how he'd once wanted to start a revolution among the Moroi, I wondered if the queen's murderer actually *was* the most evil villain we knew.

Victor snorted. "Hardly." He put his hands behind his back as he paced the room and pretended to study the art. I again wondered how far Robert's shield extended. "I have much more sophisticated methods to accomplish my goals. I wouldn't stoop to something like that—and neither would you."

I was about to point out that messing with Lissa's mind was hardly sophisticated, but his last words caught my attention. "You don't think I did it?"

He glanced back from where he'd been studying a man with a top hat and cane. "Of course not. You'd never do anything that required that much foresight. And, if what I've heard about the crime scene is true, you'd never leave that much evidence behind."

There was both an insult and a compliment there. "Well, thanks for the vote of confidence. I've been worrying about what you'd think." This earned me a smile, and I crossed my arms over my chest. "How do you guys even know what's happening at Court? Do you have spies?"

"This sort of thing spreads throughout the Moroi world quickly," said Victor. "I'm not that out of touch. I knew about her murder almost as soon as it happened. And about your most impressive escape."

My attention mostly stayed on Victor, but I did cast a quick glance at Robert. He remained silent, and from the blank, distracted look in his eyes, I wondered if he was even aware of what was being said around him. Seeing him always sent a chill down my spine. He was a prominent example of spirit at its worst.

"Why do you care?" I demanded. "And why the hell are you bothering me in my dreams?"

Victor continued his pacing, pausing to run his fingertips along the harp's smooth, wooden surface. "Because I have a great interest in Moroi politics. And I'd like to know who's responsible for the murder and what their game is."

I smirked. "Sounds like you're just jealous someone else is pulling the strings besides you for a change. No pun intended."

His hand dropped from the harp, back to his side, and he fixed his sharp eyes on me, eyes the same pale green as Lissa's. "Your witty commentary isn't going to get you anywhere. You can either let us help you or not."

"You are the *last* person I want help from. I don't need it."

"Yes. Things seem to be going quite well for you, now that you're a hunted fugitive and on the run with a man that many still believe is Strigoi." Victor gave a calculated pause. "Of course, I'm sure you don't mind that last part so much. You know, if I found you two, *I* could probably shoot you and be welcomed back as a hero."

"Don't bet on it." Rage burned through me, both at his insinuation and because he'd caused so much trouble for Dimitri and me in the past. With great force of will, I replied in a low, deadly voice: "I am going to find *you*. And you probably won't live to see the authorities."

"We already established murder isn't in your skill set." Victor sat down in one of the cushioned chairs, making himself comfortable. Robert continued

standing, that out-of-it expression still on his face. "Now, the first thing we need to do is determine why someone would want to kill our late queen. Her abrasive personality is hardly motivation, though I'm sure it didn't hurt. People do things like this for power and advantage, to push their agendas through. From what I hear, Tatiana's most controversial action recently was that age law—yes, that's the one. The one making you scowl at me like that. It stands to reason that her murderer opposed that."

I didn't want to comply with Victor at all. I didn't want a reasonable discussion with him. What I wanted was some indication of where he was in real life, and then, I wanted to take a chance on slamming into that invisible wall again. It'd be worth the risk if I could do some damage. So, I was a bit surprised when I found myself saying, "Or, whoever did it wanted to push something worse through—something harsher on dhampirs. They thought her decree was too soft."

I admit, catching Victor Dashkov off guard was one of the greatest joys of my life. I had that satisfaction now, seeing his eyebrows rise in astonishment. It wasn't easy proposing something a master schemer like him hadn't already considered. "Interesting," he said at last. "I may have underestimated you, Rose. That's a brilliant deduction on your part."

"Well, um . . . it wasn't exactly my deduction."

Victor waited expectantly. Even Robert snapped out of his daze and focused on me. It was creepy.

"It was Tatiana's. I mean, not her deduction. She said it directly—well, that is, the note she left for me did." Why was I rambling in front of these guys? At least I surprised Victor again.

"Tatiana Ivashkov left *you* a note with clandestine information? Whatever for?"

I bit my lip and turned my attention over to one of the paintings. It showed an elegant Moroi woman with those same jade green eyes most Dashkovs and Dragomirs shared. I suddenly wondered if perhaps Robert had formed this dream in some Dashkov mansion from their childhood. Movement in my periphery made me instantly turn back to the brothers.

Victor rose and took a few steps toward me, curiosity and cunning all over him. "There's more. What else did she tell you? She knew she was in danger. She knew this law was part of it . . . but it wasn't the only thing, was it?"

I remained silent, but a crazy idea began forming in my mind. I was actually considering seeing if Victor could help me. Of course, in retrospect, that wasn't such a crazy notion, considering I'd already busted him out of prison to get his help.

"Tatiana said . . ." Should I say it? Should I give up the secret even Lissa didn't know? If Victor knew there was another Dragomir, he might use that knowledge for one of his schemes. How? I wasn't sure but had long learned to expect the unexpected from him. Yet . . . Victor knew a lot of Moroi secrets. I would have enjoyed watching him and Abe match wits. And I didn't doubt that a lot of Victor's inside knowledge involved the Dragomirs and Dashkovs. I swallowed. "Tatiana said that there was another Dragomir. That Lissa's dad had an affair and that if I could find whoever this is, it'll give Lissa her power back on the Council."

When Victor and Robert exchanged shocked looks, I knew my plan had backfired. Victor wasn't going to give me insight. Instead, I'd been the one to just yield valuable information. Damn, damn, damn.

He turned his attention back to me, his expression speculative. "So. Eric Dragomir wasn't the saint he so often played."

I balled my fists. "Don't slam her dad."

"Wouldn't dream of it. I liked Eric immensely. But yes . . . if this is true, then Tatiana is right. Vasilisa technically has family backing, and her liberal views would certainly cause friction on a Council that never seems to change their ways." He chuckled. "Yes, I can definitely see that upsetting many people—including a murderer who wants to oppress dhampirs. I imagine he or she wouldn't want this knowledge to get out."

"Someone already tried to get rid of records linking Lissa's dad to a mistress." I again spoke without thinking and hated myself for it. I didn't want to give the brothers any more info. I didn't want to play like we were all working together here.

"And let me guess," said Victor. "That's what you're trying to do, isn't it? Find this Dragomir bastard."

"Hey, don't—"

"It's just an expression," he interrupted. "If I know you two—and I feel confident I do—Vasilisa is desperately trying to clear your name back at Court while you and Belikov are off on a sexually charged adventure to find her brother or sister."

"You don't know anything about us," I growled. Sexually charged indeed.

He shrugged. "Your face says it all. And really, it's not a bad idea. Not a great one either, but not bad. Give the Dragomir family a quorum, and you'll have a voice speaking on your behalf on the Council. I don't suppose you have any leads?"

"We're working on it," I replied evasively.

Victor looked at Robert. I knew the two didn't have any psychic communication, but as they exchanged glances, I had a feeling they were both thinking the same thing and confirming with each other. At last, Victor nodded and turned back to me.

"Very well then. We'll help you." He made it sound like he was reluctantly agreeing to do me a big favor.

"We don't need your help!"

"Of course you do. You're out of your league, Rose. You're wandering into a nest of ugly, complex politics—something you have no experience with. There's no shame in acknowledging that, just as I'm not ashamed to admit that in an irrational, ill-planned fist fight, you would certainly prove superior."

Another backhanded compliment. "We're doing just fine. We have an Alchemist helping us." There. That would show him who was out of whose league. And, to my credit, he did look slightly impressed. Slightly.

"Better than I expected. Has your Alchemist come up with a location or any lead yet?"

"She's working on it," I repeated.

He sighed in frustration. "We're going to need time then, aren't we? Both for Vasilisa to investigate Court and you to start tracking this child."

"You're the one who acts like you know everything," I pointed out. "I figured you'd know something about this."

"To my chagrin, no." Victor didn't really sound all that put out. "But as soon as we get a thread, I assure you, I'll be essential in unraveling it." He walked over to his brother and patted Robert's arm comfortingly. Robert stared back adoringly. "We'll visit you again. Let us know when you have something useful, and then we'll meet up with you."

My eyes widened. "You'll do no such—" I hesitated. I'd let Victor escape in Las Vegas. Now he was offering to come to me. Maybe I could repair that mistake and make good on my earlier threat to him. Quickly, I tried to cover my lapse of speech. "How do I know I can trust you?"

"You can't," he said bluntly. "You've got to take it on faith that the enemy of your enemy is your friend."

"I've always hated that saying. You'll always be my enemy."

I was a bit surprised when Robert suddenly came to life. He glared and stepped forward. "My brother is a good man, shadow-girl! If you hurt him . . . if you hurt him, you'll pay. And next time you won't come back. The world of the dead won't give you up a second time."

I knew better than to take the threats of a crazy man seriously, but his last words sent a chill through me. "Your brother is a psycho—"

"Enough, enough." Victor again gave Robert a reassuring pat on the arm. Still scowling at me, the younger Dashkov brother backed off, but I was willing to bet that invisible wall was back in place. "This does us no good. We're wasting time—which is something we don't have enough of. We need more. The monarch elections will start any day now, and Tatiana's murderer could have a hand in those if there really was some agenda going on. We need to slow down the elections—not just to thwart the assassin, but also to give all of us time to accomplish our tasks."

I was getting tired of all this. "Yeah? And how do you propose we do that?"

Victor smiled. "By running Vasilisa as a candidate for queen."

Seeing as this was Victor Dashkov we were dealing with, I really shouldn't have been surprised by anything he said. It was a testament to his level of craziness that he continually caught me unprepared.

"That," I declared, "is impossible."

"Not really," he replied.

I threw my hands up in exasperation. "Haven't you been paying attention to what we've been talking about? The whole point is to get Lissa full family rights with the Moroi. She can't even vote! How could she run for queen?"

"Actually, the law says she can. According to the way the nomination policy is written, one person from each royal line may run for the monarch position. That's all it says. One person from each line may run. There is no mention of how many people need to be in her family, as there is for her to vote on the Council. She simply needs three nominations—and the law doesn't specify which family they come from."

Victor spoke in such a precise, crisp way that he might as well have been reciting from a legal book. I wondered if he had all the laws memorized. I supposed if you were going to make a career of breaking laws, you might as well know them.

"Whoever wrote that law probably assumed the candidates would have family members. They just didn't bother spelling it out. That's what people will say if Lissa runs. They'll fight it."

"They can fight it all they want. Those who are denying her a Council spot base it on one line in the law books that mentions another family member. If that's their argument, that every detail *must* count, then they'll have to do the same for the election laws—which, as I have said, do not mention family backing. That's the beauty of this loophole. Her opponents can't have it both ways." A smile twisted at Victor's lips, supremely confident. "I assure you, there is absolutely nothing in the wording that prevents her from doing this."

"How about her age?" I pointed out. "The princes and princesses who run are always old." The title of prince or princess went to a family's oldest member, and traditionally, that was the person who ran for king or queen. The family could decide to nominate someone else more fitting, but even then—to my knowledge—it was always someone older and experienced.

"The only age restriction is full adulthood," said Victor. "She's eighteen. She qualifies. The other families have much larger pools to draw from, so naturally, they'd select someone who seemed more experienced. In the Dragomir case? Well, that's not an option, now is it? Besides, young monarchs aren't without precedence. There was a very famous queen—Alexandra—who wasn't much older than Vasilisa. Very well loved, very extraordinary. Her statue is by the Court's church."

I shifted uncomfortably. "Actually . . . it's, um, not there anymore. It kind of blew up."

Victor just stared. He'd apparently heard about my escape but not all of the details.

"It's not important," I said hastily, feeling guilty that I'd been indirectly responsible for blowing up a renowned queen. "This whole idea about using Lissa is ridiculous."

"You won't be the only one who thinks so," Victor said. "They'll argue. They'll fight. In the end, the law will prevail. They'll have to let her run. She'll go through the tests and probably pass. Then, when voting comes, the laws that govern those procedures reference a family member assisting with the vote."

My head was spinning by now. I felt mentally exhausted listening to all these legal loopholes and technicalities.

"Just come right out and put it in simple language," I ordered.

"When voting comes, she won't be eligible. She has no family to fulfill the role required at the actual election. In other words, the law says she can run and take the tests. Yet, people can't actually vote for her because she has no family."

"That's . . . idiotic."

"Agreed." He paused. I don't think either of us ever expected to concur on something.

"Lissa would hate this. She would never, ever want to be queen."

"Are you not following this?" exclaimed Victor. "She won't be queen. She *can't*. It's a badly written law for a situation no one foresaw. It's a mess. And it will bog down the elections so badly that we'll have extra time to find

Vasilisa's sibling and find out who really killed Tatiana."

"Hey! I told you: There's no ‘we' here. I'm not going to—"

Victor and Robert exchanged looks.

"Get Vasilisa nominated," said Victor abruptly. "We'll be in touch soon on where to meet you for the Dragomir search."

"That’s not—"

I woke up.

My immediate reaction was to swear, but then, remembering where I was, I kept my expletives inside my own head. I could make out Dimitri's silhouette in the corner, alert and watchful, and didn't want him to know I was awake. Closing my eyes, I shifted into a more comfortable position, hoping for true sleep that would block out the Dashkov brothers and their ridiculous schemes. Lissa running for queen? It was crazy. And yet . . . it really wasn't much crazier than most of the things I did.

Putting that aside, I let my body relax and felt the tug of true sleep start to take me down. Emphasis on s*tart*. Because suddenly, I felt another spirit dream materializing around me.

Apparently, this was going to be a busy night.

ELEVEN

I BRACED MYSELF, EXPECTING TO see the Dashkov brothers appear again with some last-minute "advice." Instead I saw—

"Adrian!"

I ran across the garden I'd appeared in and threw my arms around him. He hugged me back just as tightly and lifted me off the ground.

"Little dhampir," he said, once he put me down again. His arms stayed around my waist. "I've missed you."

"I've missed you too." And I meant it. The last couple days and their bizarre events had completely unhinged my life, and being with him—even in a dream—was comforting. I stood on my tiptoes and kissed him, enjoying a small moment of warmth and peace as our lips met.

"Are you okay?" he asked when I broke away. "No one'll tell me much about you. Your old man says you're safe and that the Alchemist would let him know if anything went wrong."

I didn't bother telling Adrian that that probably wasn't true, seeing as Abe didn't know we'd gone freelancing with some backwoods vampires.

"I'm fine," I assured Adrian. "Mostly bored. We're holed up in this dive of a town. I don't think anyone will come looking for us. I don't think they'd want to."

A look of relief spread over his handsome face, and it occurred to me just how worried he was. "I'm glad. Rose, you can't imagine what it's like. They aren't just questioning people who might have been involved. The guardians are making all sorts of plans to hunt you down. There's all this talk about 'deadly force.'"

"Well, they won't find me. I'm somewhere pretty remote." *Very* remote.

"I wish I could have gone with you."

He still looked concerned, and I pressed a finger to his lips. "No. Don't say that. You're better off where you are—and better not to be associated with me any more than you already are. Have you been questioned?"

"Yeah, they didn't get anything useful out of me. Too tight an alibi. They brought me in when I went to find Mikhail because we talked to—"

"I know. Joe."

Adrian's surprise was brief. "Little dhampir, you've been spying."

"It's hard not to."

"You know, as much as I like the idea of having someone always know when you're in trouble, I'm still kind of glad I don't have anyone bound to me. Not

sure I'd want them looking in my head."

"I don't think anyone would want to look in your head either. One person living Adrian Ivashkov's life is hard enough." Amusement flickered in his eyes, but it faded when I switched back to business. "Anyway, yeah. I overheard Lissa's . . . um, interrogation of Joe. That's serious stuff. What did Mikhail say? If Joe lied, that clears half the evidence against me." It also theoretically killed Adrian's alibi.

"Well, not quite half. It would have been better if Joe said you were in your room during the murder instead of admitting he's a flake who doesn't remember anything. It also would have been better if he hadn't said all this under Lissa's compulsion. Mikhail can't report that."

I sighed. Hanging out with spirit users, I'd started to take compulsion for granted. It was easy to forget that among Moroi, it was taboo, the kind of thing you'd get in serious trouble for. In fact, Lissa wouldn't just get in trouble for illicitly using it. She could also be accused of simply making Joe say whatever she wanted. Anything he said in my favor would be suspect. No one would believe it.

"Also," added Adrian, looking dismayed, "if what Joe said gets out, the world would learn about my mother's misguided acts of love."

"I'm sorry," I said, putting my arms around him. He complained about his parents all the time but really did care about his mother. Finding out about her bribery had to be tough for him, and I knew Tatiana's death still pained him. It seemed I was around a lot of men in anguish lately. "Although, I really am glad she cleared you of any connection."

"It was stupid of her. If anyone finds out, she'll be in serious trouble."

"What's Mikhail's advice then?"

"He's going to find Joe and question him privately. Go from there. For now, there's not much more we can do with the info. It's useful for us . . . but not for the legal system."

"Yeah," I said, trying not to feel disheartened. "I guess it's better than nothing."

Adrian nodded and then brushed away his dark mood in that easy way of his. Still keeping his arms around me, he pulled back slightly, smiling as he looked down at me. "Nice dress, by the way."

The topic change caught me by surprise, though I should have been used to it with him by now. Following his gaze, I noticed I was wearing an old dress of mine, the sexy black dress I'd had on when Victor had unleashed a lust charm on Dimitri and me. Since Adrian hadn't dressed me for the dream, my subconscious had dictated my appearance. I was kind of astonished it had chosen this.

"Oh . . ." I suddenly felt embarrassed but didn't know why. "My own clothes are kind of beat up. I guess I wanted something to counteract that."

"Well, it looks good on you." Adrian's fingers slid along the strap. "*Really* good."

Even in a dream, the touch of his finger made my skin tingle. "Watch it, Ivashkov. We've got no time for this."

"We're asleep. What else are we going to do?"

My protests were muffled in a kiss. I sank into it. One of his hands slid down

the side of my thigh, near the dress's edge, and it took a lot of mental energy to convince myself that him pulling the dress up was probably not going to clear my name. I reluctantly moved back.

"We're going to figure out who killed Tatiana," I said, trying to catch my breath.

"There's no 'we,'" he said, echoing the line I'd just used on Victor. "There's me. And Lissa. And Christian. And the rest of our misfit friends." He stroked my hair and then drew me close again, brushing a kiss against my cheek. "Don't worry, little dhampir. You take care of yourself. Just stay where you are."

"I can't," I said. "Don't you get it? I can't just do nothing." The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them. It was one thing to protest my inactivity with Dimitri, but with Adrian, I needed to make him and everyone else at Court think I was doing the "right thing."

"You have to. We'll take care of you." He didn't get it, I realized. He didn't understand how badly I needed to do something to help. To his credit, his intentions were good. He thought taking care of me was a big deal. He wanted to keep me safe. But he didn't truly get how agonizing inaction was for me. "We'll find this person and stop them from doing whatever it is . . . they want to do. It might take a long time, but we'll fix it."

"Time . . ." I murmured against his chest, letting the argument go. I'd get nowhere convincing him I needed to help my friends, and anyway, I had my own quest now. So much to do, so little time. I stared off into the landscape he'd created. I'd noticed trees and flowers earlier but only now realized we were in the Church's courtyard—the way it had been before Abe's assault. The statue of Queen Alexandra stood intact, her long hair and kind eyes immortalized in stone. The murder investigation really was in my friends' hands for now, but Adrian had been right: it might take a while. I sighed. "Time. We need more time."

Adrian pulled away slightly. "Hmm? What'd you say?"

I stared up at him, biting my lower lip as a million thoughts spun through my mind. I looked again at Alexandra and made my decision, wondering if I was about to set new records in foolishness. I turned back to Adrian and squeezed his hand.

"I said we need more time. And I know how we can get it . . . but . . . well, there's something you have to do for me. And you, uh, probably shouldn't mention it to Lissa yet . . ."

I had just enough time to deliver my instructions to Adrian—who was as shocked as I'd expected—before Dimitri woke me up for my shift. We switched off with little conversation. He had his usual tough face on, but I could see the lines of fatigue etched upon his features. I didn't want to bother him—yet—with my Victor and Robert encounter. Not to mention what I'd just told Adrian to do. There'd be plenty of time for a recap later. Dimitri fell asleep in that easy way of his, and Sydney never stirred the entire time. I envied her for a full night's sleep but couldn't help a smile as the room grew lighter and lighter. She'd been inadvertently put on a vampire schedule after our all-night adventures.

Of course, Lissa was on the same schedule, which meant I couldn't visit her

during my watch. Just as well. I needed to keep an eye on this creepy collective we'd stumbled into. These Keepers might not want to turn us in, but that didn't make them harmless either. I also hadn't forgotten Sydney's fears about surprise Alchemist visits.

When late afternoon came for the rest of the world, I heard stirring inside the house. I gently touched Dimitri's shoulder, and he jerked awake instantly.

"Easy," I said, unable to hide a smile. "Just a wakeup call. Sounds like our redneck friends are getting up."

This time, our voices woke Sydney. She rolled over toward us, her eyes squinting at the light coming through the badly screened window. "What time is it?" she asked, stretching her limbs.

"Not sure." I had no watch. "Probably past midday. Three? Four?"

She sat up almost as quickly as Dimitri had. "In the afternoon? " The sunlight gave her the answer. "Damn you guys and your unholy schedule."

"Did you just say ‘damn'? Isn't that against Alchemist rules?" I teased.

"Sometimes it's necessary." She rubbed her eyes and glanced toward the door. The faint noises I'd heard in the rest of the house were louder now, audible even to her ears. "I guess we need a plan."

"We have one," I said. "Find Lissa's sibling."

"I never entirely agreed to that," she reminded me. "And you guys keep thinking I can just magically type away like some movie hacker to find all your answers."

"Well, at least it's a place to—" A thought occurred to me, one that could seriously mess things up. "Crap. Your laptop won't even work out here."

"It's got a satellite modem, but it's the battery we have to worry about." Sydney sighed and stood up, smoothing her rumpled clothes with dismay. "I need a coffee shop or something."

"I think I saw one in a cave down the road," I said.

That almost got a smile from her. "There's got to be some town close by where I could use my laptop."

"But it's probably not a good idea to take the car out anywhere in this state," said Dimitri. "Just in case someone at the motel got your license plate number."

"I know," she said grimly. "I was thinking about that too."

Our brilliant scheming was interrupted by a knock at the door. Without waiting for an answer, Sarah stuck her head inside and smiled. "Oh, good. You're all awake. We're getting breakfast ready if you want to join us."

Through the doorway, scents of what seemed like a normal breakfast drifted in: bacon, eggs . . . The bread had gotten me through the night, but I was ready for real food and willing to roll the dice on whatever Raymond's family had to offer.

In the house's main section, we found a flurry of domestic activity. Raymond appeared to be cooking something over the fireplace while Paulette set the long table. It already had a platter of perfectly ordinary scrambled eggs and more slices of yesterday's bread. Raymond rose from the fireplace, holding a large metal sheet covered in crisp bacon. A smile split his bearded face when he spotted us. The more of these Keepers I saw, the more I kept noticing something. They made no attempts to hide their fangs. From childhood, my

Moroi were taught to smile and speak in a way that minimized fang exposure, in case they were out in human cities. There was nothing like that here.

"Good morning," said Raymond, carefully pushing the bacon onto another platter on the table. "I hope you're all hungry."

"Do you think that's, like, *real* bacon?" I whispered to Sydney and Dimitri. "And not like squirrel or something?"

"Looks real to me," said Dimitri.

"I'd say so too," said Sydney. "Though, I guarantee it's from their own pigs and not a grocery store."

Dimitri laughed at whatever expression crossed my face. "I always love seeing what worries you. Strigoi? No. Questionable food? Yes."

"What about Strigoi?"

Joshua and Angeline entered the house. He had a bowl of blackberries, and she was pushing the little kids along. From their squirming and dirty faces, they clearly wanted to go back outside. It was Angeline who had asked the question.

Dimitri covered for my squeamishness. "Just talking about some of Rose's Strigoi kills."

Joshua came to a standstill and stared at me, those pretty blue eyes wide with amazement. "You've killed the Lost? Er—Strigoi?" I admired his attempt to use "our" term. "How many?"

I shrugged. "I don't really know anymore."

"Don't you use the marks?" Raymond scolded. "I didn't think the Tainted had abandoned those."

"The marks—oh. Yeah. Our tattoos? We do." I turned around and lifted up my hair. I heard a scuffling of feet and then felt a finger touching my skin. I flinched and whipped back around, just in time to see Joshua lowering his hand sheepishly.

"Sorry," he said. "I've just never seen some of these. Only the *molnija* marks. That's how we count our Strigoi kills. You've got . . . a lot."

"The S-shaped mark is unique to *them*," said Raymond disapprovingly. That look was quickly replaced by admiration. "The other's the *zvezda*."

This earned gasps from Joshua and Angeline and a "What?" from me.

"The battle mark," said Dimitri. "Not many people call it *zvezda* anymore. It means 'star.'"

"Huh. Makes sense," I said. The tattoo was, in fact, kind of shaped like a star and was given when someone had fought in a big enough battle to lose count of Strigoi kills. After all, there were only so many *molnija* marks you could cram on your neck.

Joshua smiled at me in a way that made my stomach flutter just a little. Maybe he was part of a pseudo-Amish cult, but that didn't change the fact that he was still good-looking. "Now I understand how you could have killed the Tainted queen."

"It's probably fake," said Angeline.

I'd been about to protest the queen-killing part, but her comment derailed me. "It is not! I earned it when Strigoi attacked our school. And then there were plenty more I took down after that."

"The mark can't be that uncommon," said Dimitri. "Your people must have

big Strigoi fights every once in a while."

"Not really," said Joshua, his eyes still on me. "Most of us have never fought or even seen the Lost. They don't really bother us."

That was surprising. If ever there was a Strigoi target, a group of Moroi, dhampirs, and humans out in the middle of nowhere would be it. "Why not?" I asked.

Raymond winked at me. "Because we fight back."

I pondered his enigmatic statement as the family sat down to eat. Again, I thought about the entire community's willingness to fight when we'd first arrived. Was it really enough to scare off Strigoi? Not much scared them, but maybe certain things were too much of an inconvenience to deal with. I wondered what Dimitri's opinion would be on that. His own family had come from a community that separated itself somewhat from mainstream Moroi life, but it was nothing like this.

All of this spun in my mind while we ate and talked. The Keepers still had a lot more questions about us and Tatiana. The only one not participating was Angeline. She ate as little as Sydney and kept watching me with a scowl.

"We need some supplies," said Sydney abruptly, interrupting me in the middle of a gruesome story. I didn't mind, but the others looked disappointed. "Where's the nearest town that would have a coffee shop . . . or any restaurant?"

"Well," said Paulette. "Rubysville is a little over an hour north. But we have plenty of food here for you."

"It's not about food," I said quickly. "Yours has been great." I glanced at Sydney. "An hour's not so bad, right?"

She nodded and then glanced hesitantly at Raymond. "Is there any way . . . is there any way we could borrow a car? I'll . . ." The next words clearly caused her pain. "I'll leave the keys to mine until we get back."

He arched an eyebrow. "You've got a nice car."

Sydney shrugged. "The less we drive it around here, the better."

He told us we could take his truck and that he "probably" wouldn't even need to use the CR-V. Sydney gave him a tight smile of thanks, but I knew images of vampires joyriding in her car were dancing through her head.

We set out soon after that, wanting to be back before the sun went down. People were out and about in the commune, doing chores or whatever else it was they did with their lives. A group of children sat around a dhampir reading a book to them, making me wonder what sort of education process they had here.

All of the Keepers stopped whatever they were doing as we passed, giving us either curious looks or outright smiles. I smiled back occasionally but mostly kept my eyes ahead. Joshua was escorting us back to the "parking lot" and managed to walk beside me when we reached the narrow path.

"I hope you won't be gone long," he said. "I'd wanted us to talk more."

"Sure," I said. "That'd be fun."

He brightened and chivalrously pushed aside a low-hanging branch. "Maybe I can show you my cave."

"Your—wait. What? Don't you live with your dad?"

"For now. But I'm getting my own place." There was pride in his voice. "It's

not as big as his, of course, but it's a good start. It's almost cleaned out."

"That's really, um, great. Definitely show me when we're back." The words came easily to my lips, but my mind was pondering the fact that Raymond's house was apparently "big."

Joshua parted ways from us when we reached Raymond's truck, a big red pickup with a seat that could just barely hold the three of us. Considering the Keepers didn't leave the woods much, the truck seemed like it had seen a lot of miles. Or maybe just a lot of years of disuse.

"You shouldn't lead him on like that," Dimitri said, when we'd been on the road for about ten minutes. Surprisingly, Sydney had let him drive. I guessed she figured a manly truck deserved a manly driver.

Now that we were moving, my mind had focused back on the task at hand: finding the other Dragomir. "Huh?"

"Joshua. You were flirting with him."

"I was not! We were just talking."

"Aren't you with Adrian?"

"Yes!" I exclaimed, glaring at Dimitri. His eyes were fixed on the road. "And that's why I wasn't flirting. How can you read so much into that? Joshua doesn't even like me that way."

"Actually," said Sydney, sitting between us, "he does."

I turned my incredulity on her. "How do you know? Did he pass you a note in class or something?"

She rolled her eyes. "No. But you and Dimitri are like gods back at camp."

"We're outsiders," I reminded her. "Tainted."

"No. You're renegade Strigoi – and queen-killers. It might have all been southern charm and hospitality back there, but those people can be savage. They put a big premium on being able to beat people up. And, considering how scruffy most of them are, you guys are . . . well . . . let's just say you two are the hottest things to walk through there in a while."

"You're not hot?" I asked.

"It's irrelevant," she said, flustered by the comment. "Alchemists aren't even on their radar. We don't fight. They think we're weak."

I thought back to the enraptured faces and had to admit that a lot of the people there did have a weathered, worn-out look. Almost. "Raymond's family was pretty good-looking," I pointed out. I heard a grunt from Dimitri who no doubt read this as evidence of me flirting with Joshua.

"Yeah," she said. "Because they're probably the most important family in town. They eat better, probably don't have to work in the sun as much. That kind of stuff makes a difference."

There was no more talk of flirting as we continued the drive. We made good time to Rubysville, which looked eerily similar to the first town we'd stayed in. When we stopped at what appeared to be the Rubysville's only gas station, Sydney ran inside to ask a few questions. She came back, reporting that there was indeed a café of sorts where she could plug in her laptop and try to look up what we needed.

She ordered coffee, and we sat there with her, too full from breakfast to order anything substantial. After a couple dirty looks from a waitress who seemed to regard us as loiterers, Dimitri and I decided to take a walk around

town. Sydney looked almost as pleased as the waitress about this. I don't think she liked having us hover around.

I'd given Sydney a hard time about West Virginia, but I had to admit the scenery was beautiful. Soaring trees, full of summer leaves, surrounded the town like an embrace. Beyond them, mountains loomed, very different from the ones I'd grown up with near St. Vladimir's. These were rolling and green, covered in more trees. Most of the mountains surrounding St. Vladimir's had been stony and jagged, often with snowy peaks. A strange sense of nostalgia came over me, thinking back to Montana. There was a good possibility I'd never see it again. If I spent the rest of my life on the run, St. Vladimir's was the last place I could go. If I was caught, well . . . then I'd definitely never get to see Montana again.

"Or any place,"I murmured, speaking out loud before I could catch myself.

"Hmm?" asked Dimitri.

"I was just thinking about if the guardians find us. I never realized how much there was I wanted to do and see. Suddenly, that's all at stake, you know?" We moved off to the side of the road as an orange pickup came driving by. Children out of school for the summer screeched and laughed in the back of it. "Okay, suppose my name isn't cleared and we never find the real murderer. What's the next-best-case scenario? Me: always running, always hiding. That'll be my life. For all I know, I *will* have to go live with the Keepers."

"I don't think it'll come to that," said Dimitri. "Abe and Sydney would help you find some place safe."

"Is there a safe place? For real? Adrian said the guardians are increasing their efforts to find us. They've got the Alchemists and probably human authorities looking for us too. No matter where we go, we'll run the risk of being spotted. Then we'll have to move on. It'll be like that forever."

"You'll be alive," he pointed out. "That's what matters. Enjoy what you have, every little detail of wherever you are. Don't focus on where you *aren't*."

"Yeah," I admitted, trying to follow his advice. The sky seemed a little bluer, the birds a little louder. "I suppose I shouldn't whine over the dream places I won't get to see. I should be grateful I get to see anything at all. And that I'm not living in a cave."

He glanced over at me and smiled, something unreadable in his eyes. "Where do you want to go?"

"What, right now?" I glanced around, sizing up our options. There was a bait and tackle store, a drugstore, and an ice cream parlor. I had a feeling that last one would be a necessary trip before leaving town.

"No, in the world."

I eyed him warily. "Sydney's going to be pissed if we take off for Istanbul or something."

This got me full-fledged laughter. "Not what I had in mind. Come on."

I followed him toward what looked like the bait and tackle store and then noticed a small building tucked behind it. Naturally, his sharp eyes had seen what I missed—probably because I'd been fixated on the ice cream.
RUBYSVILLE PUBLIC LIBRARY.

"Whoa, hey," I said. "One of the few perks of graduating was avoiding places

like this."

"It's probably air conditioned," he pointed out.

I looked down at my sweat-soaked tank top and noticed a faint pink tinge to my skin. With my tanned complexion, I rarely burned, but this was some serious sun—even so late in the day. "Lead on," I told him.

The library was mercifully cool, though even smaller than the one at St. Vladimir's. With some uncanny sense (or maybe just a knowledge of the Dewey Decimal System), Dimitri led us over to the travel section—which consisted of about ten books, three of which were about West Virginia. He frowned.

"Not quite what I expected." He scanned the shelf twice and then pulled out a large, bright-colored one entitled *100 Best Places to Visit in the World*.

We sat down cross-legged on the floor, and he handed me the book. "No way, comrade," I said. "I know books are a journey of the imagination, but I don't think I'm up for that today."

"Just take it," he said. "Close your eyes, and flip randomly to a page."

It seemed silly, considering everything else going on in our life, but his face said he was serious. Indulging him, I closed my eyes and selected a page in the middle. I opened to it.

"Mitchell, South Dakota?" I exclaimed. Remembering I was in a library, I lowered my voice. "Out of all the places in the world, that makes the top hundred?"

He was smiling again, and I'd forgotten how much I'd missed that. "Read it."

"'Located ninety minutes outside of Sioux Falls, Mitchell is home to the Corn Palace.'" I looked up at him in disbelief. "*Corn Palace?*"

He scooted over next to me, leaning close to look at the pictures. "I figured it'd be made of corn husks," he noted. The pictures actually showed what looked like a Middle Eastern—or even Russian—style building, with turrets and onion domes.

"Me too." Reluctantly, I added, "I'd visit it. I bet they have great T-shirts."

"And," he said, a sly look in his eyes, "I bet no guardians would look for us there."

I made no attempts to conceal my laughter, imagining us living as fugitives in the Corn Palace for the rest of our lives. My amusement brought us a scolding from a librarian, and we quieted as Dimitri took his turn. Sao Paolo, Brazil. Then my turn: Honolulu, Hawaii. Back and forth we passed the book, and before long, we were both lying on the floor, side by side, sharing mixed reactions as we continued our "global tour of the imagination." Our arms and legs just barely touched.

If anyone had told me forty-eight hours ago that I'd be lying in a library with Dimitri, reading a travel book, I would have said they were crazy. Almost as crazy was the realization that I was doing something perfectly ordinary and casual with him. Since the moment we'd met, our lives had been about secrecy and danger. And really, those *were* still the dominant themes in our lives. But in those quiet couple of hours, time seemed to stand still. We were at peace. We were friends.

"Florence, Italy," I read. Pictures of elaborate churches and galleries filled the page. "Sydney wants to go there. She wanted to study there, actually. If

Abe could have managed that, I think she would have served him for life."

"She's still pretty obedient," Dimitri remarked. "I don't know her well, but I'm pretty sure Abe's got something on her."

"He got her out of Russia, back to the U.S."

He shook his head. "It's got to be more than that. Alchemists are loyal to their order. They don't like us. She hides it—they're trained to—but every minute with the Keepers is agony. For her to help us and betray her superiors, she owes him for some serious reason." We both paused a moment, wondering what mysterious arrangement my father had with her. "It's irrelevant, though. She's helping us, which is what matters . . . and we should probably get back to her."

I knew he was right but hated to go. I wanted to stay here, in this illusion of tranquility and safety, letting myself believe I might really make it to the Parthenon or even the Corn Palace someday. I handed the book back to him. "One more."

He picked his random page and opened the book. His smile fell. "Saint Petersburg."

A weird mix of feelings entangled themselves in my chest. Nostalgia—because the city was beautiful. Sorrow—because my visit had been tainted by the awful task I'd gone there to do.

Dimitri stared at the page for a long time, wistfulness on his face. It occurred to me then that, despite his earlier pep talk, he had to be experiencing what I did for Montana: our old, favorite places were lost to us now.

I nudged him gently. "Hey, enjoy where you're at, remember? Not where you can't go."

He reluctantly shut the book and dragged his eyes away from it. "How'd you get so wise?" he teased.

"I had a good teacher." We smiled at each other. Something occurred to me. All this time, I'd figured he'd helped break me out because of Lissa's orders. Maybe there was more to it. "Is that why you escaped with me?" I asked. "To see what parts of the world you could?"

His surprise was brief. "You don't need me to be wise, Rose. You're doing fine on your own. Yes, that was part of it. Maybe I would have been welcomed back eventually, but there was the risk I wouldn't. After . . . after being Strigoi . . ." He stumbled over the words a little. "I gained a new appreciation for life. It took a while. I'm still not there. We're talking about focusing on the present, not the future—but it's my past that haunts me. Faces. Nightmares. But the farther I get from that world of death, the more I want to embrace life. The smell of these books and the perfume you wear. The way the light bends through that window. Even the taste of breakfast with the Keepers."

"You're a poet now."

"No, just starting to realize the truth. I respect the law and the way our society runs, but there was no way I could risk losing life in some cell after only just finding it again. I wanted to run too. That's why I helped you. That and—"

"What?" I studied him, desperately wishing he wasn't so good at keeping emotions off his face. I knew him well; I understood him. But he could still

hide things from me.

He sat up, not meeting my eyes. "It doesn't matter. Let's go back to Sydney and see if she found out anything . . . although, as much as I hate to say it, I think it's unlikely."

"I know." I stood with him, still wondering what else he would have said. "She probably gave up and started playing *Minesweeper*."

We headed back toward the café, stopping briefly for ice cream. Eating it while we walked proved quite the challenge. The sun was nearing the horizon, painting everything orange and red, but the heat lingered. *Enjoy it, Rose*, I told myself. *The colors. The taste of chocolate.* Of course, I'd always loved chocolate. My life didn't need to be on the line for me to enjoy dessert.

We reached the café and found Sydney bent over her laptop, with a barely eaten Danish and what was probably her fourth cup of coffee. We slid into seats beside her.

"How's it—hey! You *are* playing *Minesweeper*!" I tried to peer closer at her screen, but she turned it from me. "You're supposed to be finding a connection to Eric's mistress."

"I already did," she said simply.

Dimitri and I exchanged astonished looks.

"But I don't know how useful it'll be."

"Anything'll be useful," I proclaimed. "What did you find?"

"After trying to track down all those bank records and transactions—and let me tell you, that is *not* fun at all—I finally found a small piece of info. The bank account we have now is a newer one. It was moved from another bank about five years ago. The old account was still a Jane Doe, *but* it did have a next-of-kin reference in the event something happened to the account holder."

I could hardly breathe. Financial transactions were lost on me, but we were about to get something solid. "A real name?"

Sydney nodded. "Sonya Karp."

TWELVE

DIMITRI AND I BOTH FROZE as the shock of that name hit us. Sydney, glancing between our faces, gave us a dry smile.

"I take it you know who that is?"

"Of course," I exclaimed. "She was my teacher. She went crazy and turned Strigoi."

Sydney nodded. "I know."

My eyes widened further. "She's not . . . she's not the one who had an affair with Lissa's dad, is she?" Oh dear God. That would be one of the most unexpected developments in the rollercoaster that was my life. I couldn't even begin to process the effects of that.

"Not likely," she said. "The account was opened several years before she was added as the beneficiary—which was right when she turned eighteen. So, if we're assuming the account was created around the time the baby was born, then she would have been way too young. Sonya's probably a relative."

My earlier astonishment was giving way to excitement, and I could see the same thing happening to Dimitri. "You must have records about her family," he said. "Or if not, some Moroi probably does. Who's close to Sonya? Does she have a sister?"

Sydney shook her head. "No. That'd be an obvious choice, though. Unfortunately, she has other family—*tons* of it. Her parents both came from giant families, so she has lots of cousins. Even some of her aunts are the right age."

"We can look them up, right?" I asked. A thrill of anticipation was running through me. I honestly hadn't expected this much information. True, it was small, but it was something. If Sonya Karp was related to Eric's mistress, that had to be something we could track.

"There's a lot of them." Sydney shrugged. "I mean, yeah, we could. It'd take a long time to find everyone's life history, and even then—especially if this was covered up enough—we'd have a hard time finding out if any of them is the woman we're looking for. Or even if any of them know who she is."

Dimitri's voice was low and thoughtful when he spoke. "One person knows who Jane Doe is."

Sydney and I both looked at him expectantly.

"Sonya Karp," he replied.

I threw up my hands. "Yeah, but we can't talk to her. She's a lost cause. Mikhail Tanner spent over a year hunting her and couldn't find her. If he can't,

then we're not going to be able to."

Dimitri turned away from me and stared out the window. His brown eyes filled with sorrow, his thoughts momentarily far away from us. I didn't entirely understand what was happening, but that peaceful moment in the library—where Dimitri had smiled and shared in the daydream of an ordinary life—had vanished. And not just the moment. That Dimitri had vanished. He was back in his fierce mode, carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders again. At last, he sighed and looked back at me. "That's because Mikhail didn't have the right connections."

"Mikhail was her boyfriend," I pointed out. "He had more connections than anyone else."

Dimitri didn't acknowledge my comment. Instead, he grew pensive again. I could see turmoil behind his eyes, some inner war. At last, it must have been decided.

"Does your phone have reception out here?" he asked her.

She nodded, reaching into her purse and handing him her phone. He held it a moment, looking like it caused him total agony to touch it. At last, with another sigh, he stood up and headed for the door. Sydney and I exchanged questioning looks and then both followed him. She lagged behind me, having to toss cash on the table and grab her laptop. I emerged outside just as Dimitri finished dialing a number and put the phone to his ear. Sydney joined us, and a moment later, the person on the other end of the line must have answered.

"Boris?" asked Dimitri.

That was all I understood because the rest was a string of rapid Russian. A strange sensation spread over me as he spoke. I was confused, lost because of the language . . . but there was more than that. I felt chilled. My pulse raced with fear. That voice . . . I knew that voice. It was his voice and yet not his voice. It was the voice of my nightmares, a voice of coldness and cruelty.

Dimitri was playing Strigoi.

Well, "playing" was really too gentle of a word. Pretending was a better way to describe it. Whatever it was, it was pretty damned convincing.

Beside me, Sydney frowned, but I didn't think she was experiencing what I was. She had never known him as Strigoi. She didn't have those horrible memories. His change in demeanor had to be obvious, but as I glanced at her face, I realized she was focused on following the conversation. I'd forgotten she knew Russian.

"What's he saying?" I whispered.

Her frowned deepened, either from the conversation or me distracting her. "He . . . he sounds like he's talking to someone he hasn't spoken to in a while. Dimitri's accusing this person of slacking off while he's been away." She fell silent, continuing her own mental translation. At one point, Dimitri's voice rose in anger, and both Sydney and I flinched. I turned to her questioningly. "He's mad about having his authority questioned. I can't tell, but now . . . it sounds like the other person's groveling."

I wanted to know every word, but it had to be hard for her to translate to me and listen at the same time. Dimitri's voice returned to normal levels—though still filled with that terrible menace—and among the flurry of words, I heard "Sonya Karp" and "Montana."

"He's asking about Ms. Kar—Sonya?" I murmured. She hadn't been my teacher for a long time. I might as well call her Sonya now.

"Yeah," said Sydney, eyes still on Dimitri. "He's asking—er, telling—this person to locate someone else and see if he can find Sonya. This person . . ." She paused to listen again. "This person he's asking about sounds like he knows a lot of people in the area she was last seen in."

I knew "people" in this context meant "Strigoi." Dimitri had risen quickly in their ranks, asserting his will and power over others. Most Strigoi operated solo, rarely working in groups, but even the lone ones recognized threats and more dominant Strigoi. Dimitri was working his contacts, just as he'd said earlier. If any Strigoi had heard about his transformation—and believed it—they wouldn't have been able to pass the news quickly, not with their disorganization. As it was, Dimitri was already having to play leapfrog to find sources who knew other sources who might know Sonya's location.

Dimitri grew loud and angry again, his voice becoming—if possible—more sinister. I suddenly felt trapped, and even Sydney looked scared now. She swallowed.

"He's telling this guy that if he doesn't get answers by tomorrow night, Dimitri's going to find him and rip him apart and . . ." Sydney didn't bother finishing. Her eyes were wide. "Use your imagination. It's pretty terrible." I decided then that I was kind of glad I hadn't heard all of the conversation in English.

When Dimitri finished the call and returned Sydney's phone, that mask of malice melted from his face. Once again, he was my Dimitri, Dimitri the dhampir. Dejection and despair radiated off him, and he slumped against the café's wall, staring upward into the sky. I knew what he was doing. He was trying to calm himself, seize control of the emotions that had to be warring within him. He'd just done something that might give us clues we needed . . . but it had been at a terrible cost to himself. My fingers twitched. I wanted to put a comforting arm around him or at least pat his shoulder so he'd know he wasn't alone. But, I held back, suspecting he wouldn't like it.

At last, he turned his gaze back to us. He'd regained his control—at least on the outside. "I've sent someone to ask about her," he said wearily. "It might not work out. Strigoi are hardly the type to keep a database. But they do occasionally keep an eye on one another, if only for their own self-preservation. We'll find out soon if there are any hits."

"I . . . wow. Thank you,"I said, fumbling at the words. I knew he needed no thanks, but it felt necessary to me.

He nodded. "We should get back to the Keepers . . . unless you think this is a safe place to stay?"

"I'd rather stay off civilized radar," said Sydney, moving toward the truck. "Besides, I want my car keys back."

The ride back felt ten times longer. Dimitri's mood filled up the whole cabin, almost suffocating us with its despair. Even Sydney could feel it. She'd let him drive again, and I couldn't decide if that was a good or bad thing. Would the road distract him from his Strigoi torment? Or would his agony distract him from the road and put us off in a ditch?

Fortunately, we made it back safe and sound and found two of the Keepers

waiting for us in the lot, a Moroi woman and a human guy who both looked fierce. I still couldn't shake the strangeness of both races being battle-ready. I wondered if these two were a couple.

Back in the camp, we found the communal bonfire ablaze and people sitting out around it, some eating and some just socializing. I'd learned at breakfast that the fire was always there for those who wanted to bond but that plenty of families kept to their own households as well.

We went back to Raymond's house, but only Sarah and Joshua were there. She was cleaning up dishes, and he sat restlessly in a chair. As soon as he caught sight of me at the door, he sprang up, radiant smile on high-beam again.

"Rose! You're back. We were starting to worry . . . I mean, not that anything had happened to you—not with your skills—but that maybe you'd just left us."

"Not without our car," said Sydney, placing the truck keys on the table. The CR-V's were sitting there already, and relief flooded her face as she snatched them up.

Sarah offered us leftovers, which we declined, having stocked up on snack food at Rubysville's gas station. "Well," she said, "if you're not going to eat, you might as well join the others out at the fire. Jess McHale might sing tonight if they can get her to drink enough, and drunk or sober, that woman has the finest voice I've ever heard."

I briefly met Dimitri and Sydney's eyes. I admit, I was a little curious to see how this wilderness group partied it up, even though moonshine and folk songs weren't really my first choice of entertainment. Dimitri still wore that haunted look from the phone call.

I had a suspicion he would have been content to isolate himself in our room, but when Sydney said she'd go to the fire, his response came automatically: "I'll go too." I knew instantly what he was doing. His Strigoi days tormented him. Talking to Strigoi tormented him. And maybe—no, certainly—he wanted to hide away and try to block it all out, but he was Dimitri. Dimitri protected those who needed it, and even if listening to fireside songs wasn't exactly life-threatening, it was still a semi-dangerous situation for a civilian like Sydney. He couldn't allow that. Plus, he knew Sydney would feel safer with both of us nearby.

I started to say I'd join them, but Joshua spoke before I could. "Do you still want to see my cave? There's a little light left outside. You'll get a better view that way than if we have to use a torch."

I'd forgotten about my last conversation with Joshua and started to decline his offer. But then, something flashed in Dimitri's eyes, something disapproving. So. He didn't want me going off with some young, good-looking guy. Was it legitimate concern about the Keepers? Was it jealousy? No, surely not the latter. We'd established—many, many times—that Dimitri wanted no romantic connection with me. He'd even stood up for Adrian earlier. Was this some kind of ex-boyfriend thing? Back in Rubysville, I'd believed Dimitri and I could be friends, but that wouldn't happen if he thought he could control me and my love life. I'd known girls with exes like that. I wouldn't be one. I could hang out with whomever I wanted.

"Sure," I said. Dimitri's expression darkened. "I'd love to."

Joshua and I headed off, leaving the others behind. I knew part of my decision was to prove my independence. Dimitri had said we were equals, yet he'd made an awful lot of decisions in this escape plan without me. It was nice to feel like I had the upper hand for a change, and besides, I liked Joshua and was kind of curious to learn more about how his people lived. I don't think Sydney wanted me to leave, but Dimitri would look after her.

As Joshua and I walked, we passed plenty of Keepers out and about. Just like earlier, I received a fair amount of stares. Rather than lead us down the road to where his father lived, Joshua took me around the small mountain. It was still good-sized, but after living near the Rockies, everything in the Appalachians seemed "small" to me. I guess I was a mountain snob.

Still, the mountain extended quite a ways, and we moved farther and farther from the Keepers' main settlement. The forest grew thicker, the light growing scarce as the sun finally began sinking into the horizon.

"I'm kind of on the outskirts," Joshua said apologetically. "We keep growing and growing, and there's not much room in the town's center." I thought "town" was an optimistic term but didn't say so. Yeah. I was definitely a snob. "But the caves keep going, so there's still space."

"Are they natural?" I asked.

"Some are. Some are abandoned mining caves."

"It's pretty out here," I said. I liked all the deciduous trees. I might be homesick for Montana, but the wide leaves here were a neat contrast to pine needles. "And hey, at least you get lots of privacy, right?"

"True." He smiled. "I figured you'd think it was . . . I don't know. Too rustic. Or savage. You probably think we all are."

His observation startled me. Most of the Keepers had been so fiercely defensive of their way of life that I hadn't thought anyone would even think an outsider would question it—or that any Keeper would care if we did.

"It's just different," I said diplomatically. "A lot different from what I'm used to." I felt a flash of homesickness for all the people and places I was now cut off from. Lissa. Adrian. Our other friends. Court. St. Vladimir's. I shook the feeling off quickly. I had no time to mope and could at least check on Lissa later.

"I've been to human towns," continued Joshua. "And other places the Tainted live. I can see why you'd like them." He turned a bit sheepish. "I wouldn't mind electricity."

"Why don't you guys use it?"

"We would if we could. We're just too far out, and no one really knows we're here anyway. The lily-people say it's better for hiding us."

It hadn't occurred to me that they simply endured these conditions because they were forced to in order to conceal themselves. I wondered how many of their choices came from clinging to the so-called old ways . . . and how much was influenced by the Alchemists.

"Here we are," said Joshua, pulling me from my musings.

He gestured to a dark hole at ground level. The opening was big enough for an adult to enter.

"Nice," I said. I'd noticed earlier that some of the caves were set higher into the mountains and had watched their residents either climb the rock bare-

handed or use homemade ladders. An easy-access doorway seemed luxurious.

Joshua looked surprised at my praise. "Really?"

"Really."

We'd ended up losing too much daylight. He paused to light a torch, and then I followed him inside. We had to duck a little at first, but as we went deeper into the cave, the ceiling slowly expanded and opened up into a wide, rounded space. The floor was hard-packed dirt, the stone walls rough and jagged. This was a natural cave, but I could pick out the efforts made to civilize it. The floor had been cleaned and leveled, and I saw some stones and rocks in a corner that looked like they'd been gathered up to clear space. A couple pieces of furniture had already been moved in: a narrow wooden chair and a mattress that looked like it could barely hold one person.

"You probably think it's small," said Joshua.

It was true, but it was actually bigger than my dorm room at St. Vladimir's. "Well . . . yeah, but I mean, how old are you?"

"Eighteen."

"Same as me," I said. This seemed to make him pretty happy. "Having your own, um, cave at eighteen is pretty cool." It would have been cooler still with electricity, Internet, and plumbing, but there was no need to bring that up.

His blue eyes practically shone. I couldn't help but notice what a pretty contrast they made against his tanned skin. I dismissed the thought immediately. I wasn't here for a boyfriend. But apparently, I was the only one who believed that. Joshua suddenly took a step forward.

"You can stay if you want," he said. "The other Tainted would never find you here. We could get married, and then when we had kids, we could build a loft like my parents' and—"

The word *married* had me moving toward the entrance as shocked and panicked as I would be by a Strigoi attack. Except, I usually had fair warning before those.

"Whoa, whoa, slow down." No. I hadn't seen a proposal coming. "We just met!"

Thankfully, he didn't come closer. "I know, but sometimes that's how it is."

"What, marriages between people who hardly know each other?" I asked incredulously.

"Sure. Happens all the time. And seriously, just in this short of time, I already know I like you. You're amazing. You're beautiful and obviously a good fighter. And the way you carry yourself . . ." He shook his head, awe on his face. "I've never seen anything like it."

I wished he wasn't so cute and nice. Having creepy guys profess their adoration was a lot easier to deal with than one you liked. I remembered Sydney saying I was a hot commodity here. Scorching was more like it, apparently.

"Joshua, I really like you, but," I added hastily, seeing hope fill his features, "I'm too young to get married."

He frowned. "Didn't you say you were eighteen?"

Okay. Age was probably not a good argument around here. I'd seen how young people had kids back in Dimitri's home-town. In a place like this, they probably had child marriages. I tried another angle.

"I don't even know if I want to get married."

This didn't faze him. He nodded in understanding. "That's smart. We could live together first, see how we get along." His serious expression turned back into a smile. "But I'm pretty easygoing. I'd let you win every argument."

I couldn't help it. I laughed. "Well, then, I'm going to have to win this one and tell you I'm just not ready for . . . any of it. Besides, I'm already involved with someone."

"Dimitri?"

"No. Another guy. He's back at the Tainted Court." I couldn't even believe I was saying that.

Joshua frowned. "Why isn't he here protecting you then?"

"Because . . . that's not how he is. And I can take care of myself." I'd never liked the assumption that I needed rescuing. "And look, even if he wasn't in the picture, I'm leaving soon anyway. It would never work out between you and me."

"I understand." Joshua looked disappointed but seemed to be taking the rejection okay. "Maybe when you've got everything sorted out, you'll come back."

I started to tell him not to wait for me and that he should just marry someone else (despite how ridiculous it was at his age), but then I realized that was a pointless comment. In Joshua's fantasies, he could probably marry someone else now and then add me on to his harem later, like Sarah and Paulette. So, I just simply said, "Maybe." Groping for a change in subject, I searched for anything to distract us. My eyes fell on the chair and a leafy pattern carved into it. "That's really neat."

"Thanks," he said, walking over. To my relief, he didn't pursue the earlier topic. He ran his hand lovingly over the ornately carved wood. The design looked like braided leaves. "I did it myself."

"Really?" I asked in true surprise. "That . . . that's amazing."

"If you like it . . ." His hand moved, and I feared there was a kiss or embrace coming. Instead, he reached into his shirt pocket and produced a finely carved wooden bracelet. It was a simple, sinuous design, the true marvel being how narrow and delicate it was to all be one piece. The wood had been polished to brilliance. "Here." He handed me the bracelet.

"This is for me?" I ran my finger along the smooth edge.

"If you want it. I made it while you were out today. So you'll remember me after you leave."

I hesitated, wondering if accepting this would be encouraging him. No, I decided. I'd made my views on teenage marriage clear, and anyway, he looked so nervous, I couldn't stand the thought of hurting his feelings. I slipped it onto my wrist.

"Of course I'll remember. Thank you."

From the happy look on his face, taking the bracelet made up for my earlier refusal. He showed me a few more details around the cave and then followed my suggestion to join the others at the fire. We could hear the music echoing through the trees long before we made it back, and while it was hardly my style, there was something warm and friendly about this community's way of life. I'd never been to summer camp, but I imagined this was what it'd be like.

Sydney and Dimitri sat near the group's edge. They were quiet and watchful, but everyone else sang, clapped, and talked. Again, I was stunned at how easily dhampirs, humans, and Moroi could all be involved with one another. Mixed couples were everywhere, and one—a human and Moroi—were openly making out. Every so often, when he kissed her neck, he'd also bite and take some blood. I had to glance away.

I turned back toward my friends. Sydney noticed me and looked relieved. Dimitri's expression was unreadable. Like always, the others' eyes followed my movement, and to my surprise, I saw open jealousy on some of the guys' faces. I hoped they didn't think Joshua and I had been off getting naked in the cave. That was hardly the reputation I wanted to leave behind.

"I have to talk to Sydney," I told him over the noise. I decided it'd be best to keep my distance before any rumors started, and truthfully, Sydney looked like she wanted me by her side. Joshua nodded, and I turned away. I'd taken two steps when a fist suddenly came right toward my face.

I'd had no defenses up and just barely had the presence of mind to turn my head and catch the blow on my cheek, rather than end up with a broken nose. After the initial surprise, all my training kicked in. I quickly sidestepped out of the line of attack and put my body into a fighter's stance. The music and singing stopped, and I turned to face my attacker.

Angeline.

She stood in a way similar to my own, fists clenched and eyes completely honed in on me. "Okay," she said. "It's time to find out how tough you really are."

What it was time for was someone—say, like, a parent—to come and drag her off and punish her for punching guests. Amazingly, no one moved or tried to stop her. No—that wasn't quite true. One person stood up. Dimitri had sprung to action the instant he saw me in danger. I expected him to come pull Angeline away, but a group of Keepers hastily moved to his side, saying something to him that I couldn't hear. They didn't try to physically restrain him, but whatever they said, it kept him where he stood. I would have demanded to know what they'd told him, but Angeline was coming at me again. It looked like I was on my own.

Angeline was short, even for a dhampir, but her whole body was packed with strength. She was pretty fast too, though not fast enough to get that second hit in on me. I neatly dodged it and kept my distance, not wanting to go on the offensive with this girl. She could probably do a fair amount of damage in a fight, but there was a sloppy—no, more like rough—edge to it. She was a scrapper, someone who'd done a lot of brawling but without any formal training.

"Are you insane?" I exclaimed, moving out of the way of another assault. "Stop this. I don't want to hurt you."

"Sure," she said. "That's what you want everyone to think, right? If you don't actually have to fight, then they'll all go on believing those marks are real."

"They *are* real!" The insinuation that I'd faked my tattoos sparked my temper, but I refused to get drawn into this ridiculous scuffle.

"Prove it," she said, coming at me again. "Prove you're who you say you are."

It was like a dance, keeping away from her. I could have done it all night, and a few dismayed cries from the crowd demanded we "get on with it."

"I don't have to prove anything," I told her.

"It's a lie then." Her breathing was heavy now. She was working a lot harder than me. "Everything you Tainted do is a lie."

"Not true," I said. Why was Dimitri letting this go on? Out of the corner of my eye, I caught sight of him, and so help me, he was *smiling*.

Meanwhile, Angeline was still continuing her tirade as she tried to hit me. "You all lie. You're all weak. Especially your 'royals.' They're the worst of all."

"You don't know them at all. You don't know anything about them."

She might be able to carry on a conversation, but I could see her growing increasingly frustrated. If not for the fact I was pretty sure she'd hit me in the back, I would have taken the noble approach and simply walked away. "I know enough," she said. "I know they're selfish and spoiled and don't do anything for themselves. They don't care about anyone else. They're all the same."

I actually agreed with Angeline about some royals but didn't like the generalization. "Don't talk about things you don't understand," I snapped. "They're not all like that."

"They *are*," she said, pleased to see me angry. "I wish they were all dead."

It was hardly enough to push me into offense mode, but the comment did cloud my thoughts enough that I let her get through my guard, just a little. I never would have let that happen with a Strigoi, but I'd underestimated this wild girl. Her leg snaked out just enough to hit my knee, and it was like tossing a spark into gasoline. Everything exploded.

With that hit, I stumbled slightly, and she pushed her advantage. My battle instincts took over, and I had no choice but to strike back before she could hit me. People began cheering now that the fight was "really going." I was on offense, trying to subdue her, meaning the physical contact had jumped up exponentially. I was still better than her, no doubt, but in trying to get to her, I put myself in her range. She landed a few blows on me, nothing serious, before I was able to tackle her to the ground. I expected that to be the end, but she pushed back against me before I could fully restrain her. We rolled over, and she tried to take the dominant position. I couldn't allow that and managed a punch on the side of her face that was a lot harder than the earlier one.

I thought that would be the end of the fight. My hit had knocked her off me, and I started to stand, but then that little bitch grabbed my hair and jerked me back down. I twisted out of her hold—though I'm pretty sure she took some hair away with her—and this time managed to fully pin her, throwing all my weight and strength into it as I pressed down. I knew it had to be painful but didn't really care. She'd started it. Besides, this skirmish had gone beyond defense. Pulling someone's hair was just playing dirty.

Angeline made a few more attempts to break away, but when it became clear she couldn't, those around us began whistling and cheering. A few moments later, that dark and furious look vanished from Angeline's face, replaced by resignation. I eyed her warily, not about to let down my guard.

"Fine," she said. "I guess it's okay. Go ahead."

"Huh? What's okay?" I demanded.
"It's okay if you marry my brother."

THIRTEEN

"IT'S NOT FUNNY!"

"You're right," agreed Sydney. "It's not funny. It's *hilarious*."

We were back at Raymond's house, in the privacy of our room. It had taken forever for us to get away from the fireside festivities, particularly after learning a terrible fact about a Keeper custom. Well, I thought it was terrible, at least. It turned out that if someone wanted to marry someone else around here, the prospective bride and groom each had to battle it out with the other's nearest relative of the same sex. Angeline had spotted Joshua's interest from the moment I'd arrived, and when she'd seen the bracelet, she'd assumed some sort of arrangement had been made. It therefore fell on her, as his sister, to make sure I was worthy. She still didn't like or entirely trust me, but proving myself a capable fighter had shot me up in her esteem, allowing her to consent to our "engagement." It had then taken a lot of fast-talking to convince everyone—including Joshua—that there was no engagement. Had there been, I'd learned, Dimitri would have had to stand in as my "relative" and fight Joshua.

"Stop that," I chastised. Dimitri leaned against one of the room's walls, arms crossed, watching as I rubbed where Angeline had hit my cheekbone. It was hardly the worst injury I'd ever had, but I'd definitely have a bruise tomorrow. There was a small smile on his face.

"I told you not to encourage him," came Dimitri's calm response.

"Whatever. You didn't see this coming. You just didn't want me to—" I bit off my words. I wouldn't say what was on my mind: that Dimitri was jealous. Or possessive. Or whatever. I just knew he'd been irritated to see me friendly with Joshua . . . and very amused at my outrage over Angeline's attack. I abruptly turned to Sydney, who was just as entertained as Dimitri. In fact, I was pretty sure I'd never seen her smile so much. "Did *you* know about this custom?"

"No," she admitted, "but I'm not surprised. I told you they're savage. A lot of ordinary problems are settled by fights like that."

"It's stupid," I said, not caring that I was whining. I touched the top of my head, wishing I had a mirror to see if Angeline had taken a noticeable chunk of hair. "Although . . . she wasn't bad. Unpolished, but not bad. Are they all that tough? The humans and Moroi too?"

"That's my understanding."

I pondered that. I was annoyed and embarrassed by what had happened, but

I had to admit the Keepers were suddenly way more interesting. How ironic that such a backward group had the insight to teach everyone to fight, no matter their race. Meanwhile, my own "enlightened" culture still refused to teach defense.

"And that's why Strigoi don't bother them," I murmured, recalling breakfast. I didn't even realize what I'd said until Dimitri's smile dropped. He glanced toward the window, face grim.

"I should check in with Boris again and see what he's found." He turned back toward Sydney. "It won't take long. We don't all need to go. Should I just take your car since I only have to go a little ways?"

She shrugged and reached for her keys. We'd learned earlier that Sydney's phone could pick up a signal about ten minutes from the village. He was right. There really was no reason for us all to go for a quick phone call. After my fight, Sydney and I were reasonably safe. No one would mess with me now. Still . . . I didn't like the thought of Dimitri reliving his Strigoi days alone.

"You should still go," I told her, thinking fast. "I need to check in on Lissa." Not entirely a lie. What my friends had heard from Joe was still weighing on me. "I can usually still keep track of what's going on around me at the same time, but it might be better if you're away—especially in case Alchemists do show up."

My logic was faulty, though her colleagues were still a concern. "I doubt they'd come while it's dark," she said, "but I don't really want to hang out if you're just going to stare into space." She didn't admit it, and I didn't need to say anything, but I suspected she didn't want someone else driving her car anyway.

Dimitri thought her coming was unnecessary and said as much, but apparently, he didn't feel like he could boss her around as much as me. So, they both set out, leaving me alone in the room. I watched them wistfully. Despite how annoying his earlier mockery had been, I was worried about him. I'd seen the effect of the last call and wished I could be there now to comfort him. I had a feeling he wouldn't have allowed that, so I accepted Sydney's accompaniment as a small victory.

With them gone, I decided I really would check in with Lissa. I'd said it more as an excuse, but truthfully, it beat the alternative—going back out and socializing. I didn't want any more people congratulating me, and apparently, Joshua had read my "maybe" and acceptance of the bracelet as a real commitment. I still thought he was devastatingly cute but couldn't handle seeing his adoration.

Sitting cross-legged on Angeline's bed, I opened myself to the bond and what Lissa was experiencing. She was walking through the halls of a building I didn't recognize at first. A moment later, I got my bearings. It was a building at Court that housed a large spa and salon—as well as the hideout of Rhonda the gypsy. It seemed weird that Lissa would be going to get her fortune told, but once I got a glimpse of her companions, I knew she was up to something else.

The usual suspects were with her: Adrian and Christian. My heart leapt at seeing Adrian again—especially after the Joshua Incident. My last spirit dream had been too brief.

Christian was holding Lissa's hand as they walked, his grip warm and reassuring. He looked confident and determined—though with that typically snarky half-smile of his. Lissa was the one who felt nervous and was clearly bracing herself for something. I could feel her dreading her next task, even though she believed it was necessary.

"Is this it?" she asked, coming to a halt in front of a door.

"I think so," said Christian. "That receptionist said it was the red one."

Lissa hesitated only a moment and then knocked. Nothing. Either the room was empty or she was being ignored. She held up her hand again, and the door opened. Ambrose stood there, stunning as always, even in jeans and a casual blue T-shirt. The clothing hugged his body in a way that showed off every muscle. He could have walked straight off the cover of *GQ*.

"Hey," he said, clearly surprised.

"Hey," said Lissa back. "We were wondering if we could talk to you?"

Ambrose ever so slightly inclined his head toward the room. "I'm kind of busy right now."

Beyond him, Lissa could see a massage table with a Moroi woman lying face down. The lower half of her body had a towel over it, but her back was bare, shining in the dim lighting with oil. Scented candles burned in the room, and a calming kind of New Age music played softly.

"Wow," said Adrian. "You don't waste any time, do you? She's only been in her grave a few hours, and you've already got someone new." Tatiana had finally been laid to rest earlier in the day, just before sunset. The burial had had much less fanfare than the original attempt.

Ambrose gave Adrian a sharp look. "She's my client. It's my job. You forget that some of us have to work for a living."

"Please?" asked Lissa, hastily stepping in front of Adrian. "It won't take long."

Ambrose looked my friends over a moment and then sighed. He glanced behind him. "Lorraine? I have to step outside. I'll be right back, okay?"

"Okay," called the woman. She shifted, facing him. She was older than I'd expected, mid-forties or so. I guess if you were paying for a massage, there was no reason not to have a masseuse half your age. "Hurry back."

He gave her a dazzling smile as he shut the door, a smile that dropped once he was alone with my friends. "Okay, what's going on? I don't like the looks on your faces."

Ambrose might have radically deviated from a dhampir man's normal life, but he'd had the same training as any guardian. He was observant. He was always on the lookout for potential threats.

"We, uh, wanted to talk to you about . . ." Lissa hesitated. Talking about investigations and interrogations was one thing. Carrying them out was another. "About Tatiana's murder."

Ambrose's eyebrows rose. "Ah. I see. Not sure what there is to say, except that I don't think Rose did it. I don't think you believe that either, despite what's going around. Everyone's talking about how shocked and upset you are. You're getting a lot of sympathy over having been tricked by such a dangerous and sinister 'friend.'"

Lissa felt her cheeks flush. By publicly condemning me and renouncing our

friendship, Lissa was keeping herself out of trouble. It had been Abe and Tasha's advice, and Lissa knew it was sound. Yet, even though it was an act, she still felt guilty. Christian stepped to her defense.

"Back off. That's not what this is about."

"What *is* it about then?" asked Ambrose.

Lissa jumped in, worried Christian and Adrian might upset Ambrose and make it difficult to get answers. "Abe Mazur told us that in the courtroom, you said or, uh, did something to Rose."

Ambrose looked shocked, and I had to give him points for being convincing. "Did something? What does that mean? Does Mazur think I, like, hit on her in front of all those people?"

"I don't know," admitted Lissa. "He just saw something, that's all."

"I wished her good luck," said Ambrose, still looking offended. "Is that okay?"

"Yeah, yeah." Lissa had made a point to talk to Ambrose before Abe could, fearing Abe's methods would involve threats and a lot of physical force. Now, she was wondering if she was doing so great a job. "Look, we're just trying to find out who really killed the queen. You were close to her. If there's anything —*anything*—at all you've got that can help us, we'd appreciate it. We need it."

Ambrose glanced curiously between them. Then, he suddenly understood. "You think I did it! That's what this is about." None of them said anything. "I can't believe this! I already got this from the guardians . . . but from you? I thought you knew me better."

"We don't know you at all," said Adrian flatly. "All we know is you had lots of access to my aunt." He pointed at the door. "And obviously, it didn't take you long to move on."

"Did you miss the part where I said that's my job? I'm giving her a massage, that's it. Not everything is sordid and dirty." Ambrose shook his head in frustration and ran a hand through his brown hair. "My relationship with Tatiana wasn't dirty either. I cared about her. I would never do anything to hurt her."

"Don't statistics say most murders happen between close people?" asked Christian.

Lissa glared at him and Adrian. "Stop it. Both of you." She looked back at Ambrose. "No one's accusing you of anything. But you were around her a lot. And Rose told me you were upset about the age law."

"When I first heard about it, yeah," Ambrose said. "And even then, I told Rose there was some mistake—that there must be something we didn't know. Tatiana would have never put those dhampirs in danger without a good reason."

"Like making herself look good in front of all those terrified royals?" asked Christian.

"Watch it," warned Adrian. Lissa couldn't decide which was more annoying: her two guys teaming up to spar against Ambrose or them throwing barbs at each other.

"No!" Ambrose's voice rang throughout the narrow hall. "She didn't want to do that. But if she didn't, worse things were going to happen. There are people who wanted—still want—to round up all the dhampirs who don't fight and

force them into it. Tatiana passed the age law as a way to stall that."

Silence fell. I'd already learned this from Tatiana's note, but it was shocking news to my friends. Ambrose kept going, seeing he was gaining ground.

"She was actually open to lots of other options. She wanted to explore spirit. She approved of Moroi learning to fight."

That got a reaction from Adrian. He still wore that sardonic expression, but I could also see faint lines of pain and sorrow on his face. The burial earlier must have been hard on him, and hearing others reveal information you hadn't known about a loved one had to hurt.

"Well, I obviously wasn't sleeping with her like you were," said Adrian, "but I knew her pretty well, too. She never said a word about anything like that."

"Not publicly," agreed Ambrose. "Not even privately. Only a few people knew. She was having a small group of Moroi trained in secret—men and women, different ages. She wanted to see how well Moroi could learn. If it was possible for them to defend themselves. But she knew people'd be upset about it, so she made the group and their trainer keep quiet."

Adrian gave no response to this, and I could see his thoughts had turned inward. Ambrose's revelation wasn't bad news, exactly, but Adrian was still hurt at the thought that his aunt had kept so much from him. Lissa, meanwhile, was eating the news up, seizing and analyzing every piece of info.

"Who were they? The Moroi being trained?"

"I don't know," said Ambrose. "Tatiana was quiet about it. I never found out their names, just their instructor."

"Who was . . . ?" prompted Christian.

"Grant."

Christian and Lissa exchanged startled looks. "My Grant?" she asked. "The one Tatiana assigned to me?"

Ambrose nodded. "That's why she gave him to you. She trusted him."

Lissa said nothing, but I heard her thoughts loud and clear. She'd been pleased and surprised when Grant and Serena—the guardians who had replaced Dimitri and me—had offered to teach Lissa and Christian basic defense moves. Lissa had thought she'd simply stumbled onto a progressive-thinking guardian, not realizing she had one of the pioneers in teaching combat to Moroi.

Some piece of this was important, she and I were both certain, though neither of us could make the connection. Lissa puzzled it over, not protesting when Adrian and Christian threw in some questions of their own. Ambrose was still clearly offended by the inquisition, but he answered everything with forced patience. He had alibis, and his affection and regard for Tatiana never wavered. Lissa believed him, though Christian and Adrian still seemed skeptical.

"Everyone's been all over me about her death," said Ambrose, "but nobody questioned Blake very long."

"Blake?" asked Lissa.

"Blake Lazar. Someone else she was . . ."

"Involved with?" suggested Christian, rolling his eyes.

"*Him?*" exclaimed Adrian in disgust. "No way. She wouldn't stoop that low."

Lissa racked her brain through the Lazar family but couldn't peg the name.

There were just too many of them. "Who is he?"

"An idiot," said Adrian. "Makes me look like an upstanding member of society."

That actually brought a smile to Ambrose's face. "I agree. But he's a pretty idiot, and Tatiana liked that." I heard affection in his voice as he spoke her name.

"She was sleeping with him too?" Lissa asked. Adrian winced at the mention of his great-aunt's sex life, but a whole new world of possibilities had opened up. More lovers meant more suspects. "How did you feel about that?"

Ambrose's amusement faded. He gave her a sharp look. "Not jealous enough to kill her, if that's what you're getting at. We had an understanding. She and I were close—yes, 'involved'—but we both saw other people too."

"Wait," said Christian. I had the feeling he was really enjoying this now. Tatiana's murder was no joke, but a soap opera was definitely unfolding before them. "*You* were sleeping with other people too? This is getting hard to follow."

Not for Lissa. In fact, it was becoming clearer and clearer that Tatiana's murder could have been a crime of passion, rather than anything political. Like Abe had said, someone with access to her bedroom was a likely suspect. And some woman jealous over sharing a lover with Tatiana? That was perhaps the most convincing motive thus far—if only we knew the women.

"Who?" Lissa asked. "Who else were you seeing?"

"No one who'd kill her," said Ambrose sternly. "I'm not giving you names. I'm entitled to some privacy—so are they."

"Not if one of them was jealous and killed my aunt," growled Adrian. Joshua had looked down on Adrian for not "protecting" me, but in that moment, defending his aunt's honor, he looked as fierce as any guardian or Keeper warrior. It was kind of sexy.

"None of them killed her, I'm certain," said Ambrose. "And as much as I despise him, I don't think Blake did either. He's not smart enough to pull it off and frame Rose." Ambrose gestured to the door. His teeth were clenched, and lines of frustration marred his handsome face. "Look, I don't know what else I can say to convince you. I need to get back in there. I'm sorry if I seem difficult, but this has been kind of hard on me, okay? Believe me, I'd love it if you could find out who did that to her." Pain flashed through his eyes. He swallowed and looked down for a moment, as though he didn't want them to know just how much he'd cared about Tatiana. When he looked up again, his expression was fierce and determined again. "I *want* you to and will help if I can. But I'm telling you, look for someone with political motives. Not romantic ones."

Lissa still had a million more questions. Ambrose might be convinced the murder was free of jealousy and sex, but she wasn't. She would have really liked the names of his other women but didn't want to push too hard. For a moment, she considered compelling him as she had Joe. But no. She wouldn't cross that line again, especially with someone she considered a friend. At least not yet. "Okay," she said reluctantly. "Thank you. Thank you for helping us."

Ambrose seemed surprised at her politeness, and his face softened. "I'll see if I can dig up anything to help you. They're keeping her rooms and possessions

locked down, but I might still be able to get in there. I'll let you know."

Lissa smiled, genuinely grateful. "Thank you. That'd be great."

A touch on my arm brought me back to the drab little room in West Virginia. Sydney and Dimitri were looking down at me. "Rose?" asked Dimitri. I had a feeling this wasn't the first time he'd tried to get my attention.

"Hey," I said. I blinked a couple of times, settling myself back into this reality. "You're back. You called the Strigoi?"

He didn't visibly react to the word, but I knew he hated hearing it. "Yes. I got a hold of Boris's contact."

Sydney wrapped her arms around herself. "Crazy conversation. Some of it was in English. It was even scarier than before."

I shivered involuntarily, glad that I'd missed it. "But did you find out anything?"

"Boris gave me the name of a Strigoi who knows Sonya and probably knows where she is," Dimitri said. "It's actually someone I've met. But phone calls only go so far with Strigoi. There's no way to contact him—except to go in person. Boris only had his address."

"Where is it?" I asked.

"Lexington, Kentucky."

"Oh for God's sake," I moaned. "Why not the Bahamas? Or the Corn Palace?"

Dimitri tried to hide a smile. It might have been at my expense, but if I'd lightened his mood, I was grateful. "If we leave right now, we can reach him before morning."

I glanced around. "Tough choice. Leave all this for electricity and plumbing?"

Now Sydney grinned. "And no more marriage proposals."

"And we'll probably have to fight Strigoi," added Dimitri.

I jumped to my feet. "How soon can we go?"

FOURTEEN

THE KEEPERS HAD MIXED REACTIONS to us leaving. They were usually glad to see outsiders go, especially since we had Sydney with us. But after the fight, they held me up as some kind of superhero and were enchanted by the idea of me marrying into their "family." Seeing me in action meant some of the women were beginning to eye Dimitri now too. I wasn't in the mood to watch them flirt with him—especially since, according to their courtship rules, I would apparently have to be the one to battle it out with any prospective fiancée.

Naturally, we didn't tell the Keepers our exact plans, but we did mention we'd likely be encountering Strigoi—which caused quite a reaction. Most of that reaction was excitement and awe, which continued to boost our reputations as fierce warriors. Angeline's response, however, was totally unexpected.

"Take me with you," she said, grabbing a hold of my arm, just as I started down the forest path toward the car.

"Sorry," I said, still a little weirded out after her earlier hostility. "We have to do this alone."

"I can help! You beat me . . . but you saw what I can do. I'm good. I could take a Strigoi."

For all her fierceness, I knew Angeline didn't have a clue about what she'd be facing if she ever met an actual Strigoi. The few Keepers who bore *molnija* marks spoke little about the encounters, faces grave. They understood. Angeline didn't. She also didn't realize that any novice at St. Vladimir's in the secondary school could probably take her out. She had raw potential, true, but it needed a lot of work.

"You might be able to," I said, not wanting to hurt her feelings. "But it's just not possible for you to come with us." I would have lied and given her a vague "Maybe sometime," but since that had led Joshua to thinking we were semi-engaged, I decided I'd better not.

I expected more boasts about her battle prowess. We'd learned she was regarded as one of the best young fighters in the compound, and with her pretty looks, she had plenty of admirers too. A lot of it had gone to her head, and she liked to talk about how she could beat anyone or anything up. Again, I was reminded of Jill. Jill also had a lot to learn about the true meaning of battle but was still eager to jump in. She was quieter and more cautious than Angeline, though, so Angeline's next direction caught me off guard.

"Please. It's not just the Strigoi! I want to see the world. I *need* to see something else outside of this place!" Her voice was pitched low, out of the range of the others. "I've only been to Rubysville twice, and they say that's nothing compared to other cities."

"It's not," I agreed. I didn't even consider it a city.

"Please," she begged again, this time her voice trembling. "Take me with you."

Suddenly, I felt sad for her. Her brother had also shown a little longing for the outside world, but nothing like this. He'd joked that electricity would be nice, but I knew he was happy enough without the perks of the modern world. But for Angeline, the situation was much more desperate. I too knew what it was like to feel trapped in one's life and was legitimately sorry for what I had to say.

"I can't, Angeline. We have to go on our own. I'm sorry. I really am."

Her blue eyes shimmered, and she raced off into the woods before I could see her cry. I felt horrible after that and couldn't stop thinking about her as we made our farewells. I was so distracted, I even let Joshua hug me goodbye.

Getting back on the road was a relief. I was glad to be away from the Keepers and was ready to spring into action and start helping Lissa. Lexington was our first step. We had a six-hour drive ahead of us, and Sydney, per usual, seemed adamant that no one else was going to drive her car. Dimitri and I made futile protests, finally giving up when we realized that if we were going to be facing Strigoi soon, it was probably best we rest and conserve our strength. The address for Donovan—the Strigoi who allegedly knew Sonya—was only where he could be found at night. That meant we had to make it to Lexington before sunrise, so we wouldn't lose him when he went to his daytime lair. It also meant we'd be meeting Strigoi in the dark. Certain that little would happen on the drive—especially once we were out of West Virginia—Dimitri and I agreed we could doze a little, seeing as neither of us had had a full night's sleep.

Even though the lulling of the car was soothing, I drifted in and out of restless sleep. After a few hours of this, I simply settled into the trancelike state that brought me to Lissa. It was a good thing too: I'd stumbled into one of the biggest events facing the Moroi. The nomination process to elect the new king or queen was about to begin. It was the first of many steps, and everyone was excited, given how rare monarch elections truly were. This was an event none of my friends had expected to see anytime soon in our lives, and considering recent events . . . well, we all had especial interest. The future of the Moroi was at stake here.

Lissa was sitting on the edge of a chair in one of the royal ballrooms, a huge sweeping space with vaulted ceilings and gold detailing everywhere. I'd been in this dazzling room before, with its murals and elaborate molding. Chandeliers glittered above. It had held the graduate luncheon, where newly made guardians put on their best faces and hoped to attract a good assignment. Now, the room was arranged like the Council chamber, with a long table on one side of the room that was set with twelve chairs. Opposite that table were rows and rows of other chairs—where the audience sat when the Council was in session. Except, now there were about four times as many

chairs as usual, which probably explained the need for this room. Every single chair was filled. In fact, people were even standing, crowding in as best they could. Agitated-looking guardians moved among the herd, keeping them out of doorways and making sure the bystanders were arranged in a way that allowed for optimal security.

Christian sat on one side of Lissa, and Adrian sat beside Christian. To my pleasant surprise, Eddie and Mia sat nearby too. Mia was a Moroi friend of ours who had gone to St. Vladimir's and was nearly as hardcore as Tasha about Moroi needing to defend themselves. My beloved father was nowhere in sight. None of them spoke. Conversation would have been difficult among the buzzing and humming of so many people, and besides, my friends were too awestruck by what was about to happen. There was so much to see and experience, and none of them had realized just how big the crowd would be. Abe had said things would move fast once Tatiana was buried, and they certainly had.

"Do you know who I am?"

A loud voice caught Lissa's attention, just barely carrying above the din. Lissa glanced down the row, a few seats away from Adrian. Two Moroi, a man and a woman, sat side by side and were looking up at a very angry woman. Her hands were on her hips, and the pink velvet dress she wore seemed outlandish next to the couple's jeans and T-shirts. It also wasn't going to hold up so well once she stepped outside of air conditioning.

A glare twisted her face. "I am Marcella Badica." When that didn't get a reaction from the couple, she added, "Prince Badica is my brother, and our late queen was my third cousin twice removed. There are no seats left, and someone like me *cannot* stand against the wall with the rest of that mob."

The couple exchanged glances. "I guess you should have gotten here earlier, Lady Badica," said the man.

Marcella gaped in outrage. "Didn't you just hear who I am? Don't you know who your betters are? I *insist* you give up your seats."

The couple still seemed unfazed. "This session is open to everyone, and there weren't assigned seats, last time I checked," said the woman. "We're entitled to ours as much as you are."

Marcella turned to the guardian beside her in outrage. He shrugged. His job was to protect her from threats. He wasn't going to oust others from their chairs, particularly when they weren't breaking any rules. Marcella gave a haughty "humph!" before turning sharply and stalking away, no doubt to harass some other poor soul.

"This," said Adrian, "is going to be delightful."

Lissa smiled and turned back to studying the rest of the room. As she did, I became aware of something startling. I couldn't tell exactly who was who, but the crowd wasn't composed entirely of royals—as most Council sessions were. There were tons of "commoners," just like the couple sitting near my friends. Most Moroi didn't bother with Court. They were out in the world, living their lives and trying to survive while the royals pranced around at Court and made laws. But not today. A new leader was going to be chosen, and that was of interest to all Moroi.

The milling and chaos continued for a while until one of the guardians

finally declared the room to be at capacity. Those outside were outraged, but their cries were quickly silenced when the guardians closed the doors, sealing off the ballroom. Shortly thereafter, the eleven Council members took their seats, and—to my shock—Adrian's father, Nathan Ivashkov, took the twelfth chair. The Court's herald yelled and called everyone to attention. He was someone who'd been chosen because of his remarkable voice, though I always wondered why they didn't just use a microphone in these situations. More old-world traditions, I supposed. That, and excellent acoustics.

Nathan spoke once the room settled down. "In the absence of our beloved queen . . ." He paused looking down mournfully to offer a moment of respect before continuing.

In anyone else, I might have suspected his feelings were faked, particularly after seeing him grovel so much in front of Tatiana. But, no. Nathan had loved his prickly aunt as much as Adrian had.

"And in the wake of this terrible tragedy, I will be moderating the upcoming trials and elections."

"What'd I tell you?" muttered Adrian. He had no fuzzy affection for his father. "De-lightful."

Nathan droned on a bit about the importance of what was to come and some other points about Moroi tradition. It was obvious, though, that like me, everyone in the room really wanted to get down to the main event: the nominations. He seemed to realize that too and sped up the formalities. Finally, he got to the good stuff.

"Each family, if they choose, may have one nominee for the crown who will take the tests all monarchs have endured since the beginning of time." I thought that "beginning of time" part was a bold and probably unverified exaggeration, but whatever. "The only exclusion is the Ivashkovs, since back-to-back monarchs from the same family aren't allowed. For candidacy, three nominations are required from Moroi of royal blood and proper age." He then added some stuff about what happened in the event more than one person was nominated from the same family, but even I knew the chances of that happening were non-existent. Each royal house wanted to get the best advantage here, and that would involve a unified standing behind one candidate.

Satisfied everyone understood, Nathan nodded and gestured grandly to the audience. "Let the nominations begin."

For a moment, nothing happened. It kind of reminded me of when I'd been back in school, when a teacher would say something like, "Who'd like to present their paper first?" Everyone kind of waited for someone else to get things going, and at last, it happened.

A man I didn't recognize stood up. "I nominate Princess Ariana Szelsky."

Ariana, as princess, sat on the Council and was an expected choice. She gave a gracious nod to the man. A second man, presumably from their family, also stood and gave the second nomination. The third and final nomination came from another Szelsky—a very unexpected one. He was Ariana's brother, a world traveler who was almost never at Court, and also the man my mother guarded. Janine Hathaway was most likely in this room, I realized. I wished Lissa would look around and find her, but Lissa was too focused on the

proceedings. After everything I'd been through, I suddenly had a desperate longing to see my mother.

With three nominations, Nathan declared, "Princess Ariana Szelsky is entered as a candidate." He scrawled something on a piece of paper in front of him, his motions full of flourish. "Continue."

After that, the nominations came in rapid succession. Many were princes and princesses, but others were respected—and still high-ranking—members of the families. The Ozera candidate, Ronald, was not the family's Council member, nor was he anyone I knew. "He's not one of Aunt Tasha's 'ideal' candidates," Christian murmured to Lissa. "But she admits he's not a moron."

I didn't know much about most of the other candidates either. A couple, like Ariana Szelsky, I had a good impression of. There were also a couple I'd always found appalling. The tenth candidate was Rufus Tarus, Daniella's cousin. She'd married into the Ivashkovs from the Tarus family and seemed delighted to see her cousin declared a nominee.

"I don't like him," said Adrian, making a face. "He's always telling me to do something useful with my life."

Nathan wrote down Rufus's name and then rolled up the paper like a scroll. Despite the appearance of antique customs, I suspected a secretary in the audience was typing up everything being said here on a laptop.

"Well," declared Nathan, "that concludes—"

"I nominate Princess Vasilisa Dragomir."

Lissa's head jerked to the left, and through her eyes, I recognized a familiar figure. Tasha Ozera. She'd stood and spoken the words loudly and confidently, glancing around with those ice-blue eyes as if daring anyone to disagree.

The room froze. No whispers, no shifting in chairs. Just utter and complete silence. Judging from the faces, the Ozera family's nominee was the second-most astonished person in the room to hear Tasha speak. The first, of course, was Lissa herself.

It took a moment for Nathan to get his mouth working. "That's not—"

Beside Lissa, Christian suddenly stood up. "I second the nomination."

And before Christian had even sat down, Adrian was on his feet. "I confirm the nomination."

All eyes in the room were on Lissa and her friends, and then, as one, the crowd turned toward Nathan Ivashkov. Again, he seemed to have trouble finding his voice.

"That," he managed at last, "is not a legal nomination. Due to its current Council standing, the Dragomir line is regrettably not eligible to present a candidate."

Tasha, never afraid of talking in a crowd or taking on impossible odds, leapt back up. I could tell she was eager to. She was good at making speeches and challenging the system. "Monarch nominees don't need a Council position or quorum to run for the throne."

"That makes no sense," said Nathan. There were mutters of agreement.

"Check the law books, Nate—I mean, Lord Ivashkov."

Yes, there he was at last. My tactful father had joined the conversation. Abe had been leaning against a wall near the doorway, dressed splendidly in a black suit with a shirt and tie that were exactly the same shade of emerald

green. My mother stood beside him, the slightest hint of a smile on her face. For a moment, I was captivated as I studied them side by side. My mother: the perfect picture of guardian excellence and decorum. My father: always capable of achieving his goals, no matter how twisted the means. Uneasily, I began to understand how I'd inherited my bizarre personality.

"Nominees have no requirements concerning how many people are in their family," continued Abe jovially. "They only need three royal nominations to be confirmed."

Nathan gestured angrily toward where his own wayward son and Christian sat. "They aren't from her family!"

"They don't need to be," countered Abe. "They just need to be from *a* royal family. They are. Her candidacy is within the law—so long as the princess accepts."

All heads swiveled toward Lissa now, as though they were suddenly just noticing her. Lissa hadn't twitched since the startling events began. She was in too much shock. Her thoughts seemed to move both fast and slow. Part of her couldn't even start to process what was happening around her. The rest of her mind was spinning with questions.

What was going on? Was this a joke? Or maybe a spirit-induced hallucination? Had she finally gone crazy? Was she dreaming? Was it a trick? If so, why would her own friends have been the ones to do it? Why would they do this to her? And for the love of God, would everyone stop staring at her?

She could handle attention. She'd been born and raised for it, and like Tasha, Lissa could address a crowd and make bold statements—when she supported them and was prepared. Neither of those things applied to this situation. This was pretty much the last thing in the world she had expected or wanted. And so, she couldn't bring herself to react or even consider a response. She stayed where she was, silent and shell-shocked.

Then, something snapped her from her trance. Christian's hand. He'd taken Lissa's, wrapping his fingers with hers. He gave her a gentle squeeze, and the warmth and energy he sent brought her back to life. Slowly, she looked around the room, meeting the eyes of those all watching her. She saw Tasha's determined gaze, my father's cunning look, and even my mother's expectation. That last one proved most startling of all. How could Janine Hathaway—who always did what was right and could barely crack a joke—be going along with this? How could any of Lissa's friends be going along with this? Didn't they love and care about her?

Rose, she thought. *I wish you were here to tell me what to do*.

Me too. Damned one-way bond.

She trusted me more than anyone else in the world, but she realized then that she trusted all of these friends too—well, except maybe Abe, but that was understandable. And if they were doing this, then surely—*surely*—there was a reason, right?

Right?

It made no sense to her, yet Lissa felt her legs move as she rose to her feet. And despite the fear and confusion still running through her, she found her voice inexplicably clear and confident as it rang out through the room.

"I accept the nomination."

FIFTEEN

I DIDN'T LIKE TO SEE Victor Dashkov proven right. But, oh, was he ever.

With Lissa's proclamation, the room that had been holding its breath suddenly exploded. I wondered if there had ever been a peaceful Council session in Moroi history or if I just kept coincidentally tuning into controversial ones. What followed today reminded me a lot of the day the dhampir age decree had passed. Shouting, arguments, people out of their chairs . . . Guardians who normally lined the walls and watched were out among the people, looks of concern on their faces as they prepared for any disputes that might go beyond words.

As quickly as Lissa had been at the center of everything, the room seemed to forget her. She sat back down, and Christian found her hand again. She squeezed it tightly, so much so I wondered if she was cutting off his circulation. She stared straight ahead, still reeling. Her mind wasn't focused on all the chaos, but everything her eyes and ears perceived came through to me. Really, the only attention my friends received was when Daniella came over and scolded Adrian for nominating outside his family. He shrugged it off in his usual way, and she huffed off, realizing—like many of us—that there was really no point in trying to reason with Adrian.

You'd think that in a room where everyone was scrambling to push their own family's advantage, every single person would therefore be arguing that Lissa's nomination was invalid. That wasn't the case, however—particularly because not everyone in the room *was* royal. Just as I'd noted earlier, Moroi from all over had come to witness the events that would determine their future. And a number of them were watching this Dragomir girl with interest, this princess from a dying line who could allegedly work miracles. They weren't ravenously chanting her name, but many were in the thick of the arguments, saying she had every right to step up for her family. Part of me also suspected that some of her "common" supporters simply liked the idea of thwarting the royal agenda. The young couple that had been harassed by Lady Badica weren't the only ones there who'd been pushed around by their "betters."

Most surprisingly, there were some royals speaking up for Lissa too. They might be loyal to their own families, but not all of them were heartless, selfish connivers. Many had a sense of right and wrong—and if Lissa had the law on her side, then she was in the right. Plus, lots of royals simply liked and respected her. Ariana was one person who advocated for Lissa's nomination,

despite the competition it created. Ariana knew the law well and undoubtedly realized the loophole that allowed Lissa to run would fail when election time came. Still, Ariana stood her ground, which endeared her to me even more. When the real voting did come, I hoped Ariana would win the crown. She was intelligent and fair—exactly what the Moroi needed.

Of course, Ariana wasn't the only one who knew the law. Others picked up on the loophole and argued the nomination of a candidate that no one could vote for was pointless. Normally, I would have agreed. On and on the debate raged while my friends sat quietly in the hurricane's eye. At long last, the matter was settled the way most decisions should be: through voting. With Lissa still denied her Council seat, that left eleven members to determine her future. Six of them approved her candidacy, making it official. She could run. I suspected some of those who voted for her didn't truly want her running, but their respect for the law prevailed.

Many Moroi didn't care what the Council said. They made it clear they considered this matter far from over, proving what Victor had said: this was going to rage on for a while, getting worse if she actually passed the tests and made it to the voting stages. For now, the crowd dispersed, seeming relieved—not only because they wanted to escape the yelling but also because they wanted to spread this sensational news.

Lissa continued saying little as she and our friends left. Walking past the gawkers, she remained a model of regality and calmness, like she'd already been declared queen. But when she finally escaped it all and was back in her room with the others, all those locked-up, frozen feelings exploded.

"What the *hell* were you guys thinking?" she yelled. "What have you done to me?"

Along with Adrian, Christian, and Eddie, the rest of the conspirators had shown up: Tasha, Abe, and my mom. All of them were so completely stunned by this reaction from sweet Lissa that none of them could reply now. Lissa took advantage of their silence.

"You set me up! You've put me in the middle of a political nightmare! Do you think I want this? Do you really think I want to be queen?"

Abe recovered first, naturally. "You won't be queen," he said, voice uncharacteristically soothing. "The people arguing about the other part of the law are right: no one can actually vote for you. You need family for that."

"Then what's the point?" she exclaimed. She was furious. She had every right to be. But that outrage, that anger . . . it was fueled by something worse than this situation alone. Spirit was coming to claim its price and making her even more upset than she would have been.

"The point," said Tasha, "is everything crazy you just saw in the Council room. For every argument, for every time someone drags out the law books again, we have more time to save Rose and find out who killed Tatiana."

"Whoever did it must have an interest in the throne," explained Christian. He rested a hand on Lissa's shoulder, and she jerked away. "Either for themselves or someone they know. The longer we delay their plans, the more time we have to find out who it is."

Lissa raked her hands through her long hair in frustration. I tried to pull that coil of fury from her, taking it into myself. I succeeded a little, enough

that she dropped her hands to her side. But she was still pissed off.

"How am I supposed to look for the murderer when I'm tied up doing all those stupid tests?" she demanded.

"You won't be looking," said Abe. "We will."

Her eyes widened. "That was never part of the plan! I'm not going to jump through royal hoops when Rose needs me. I want to help her!"

It was almost comical. Almost. Neither Lissa nor I could handle "sitting around" when we thought the other needed our help. We wanted to be out there, actively doing what we could to fix the situation.

"You are helping her," said Christian. His hand twitched, but he didn't try to touch her again. "It's in a different way than you expected, but in the end, it's going to help her."

The same argument everyone kept using on me. It also made her just as angry as it had made me, and I desperately tugged at the wave of instability spirit kept sending through her.

Lissa peered around the room, looking accusingly at each face. "Who in the world thought of this idea?"

More uncomfortable silence followed.

"Rose did," said Adrian at last.

Lissa spun around and glared at him. "She did not! She wouldn't do this to me!"

"She did," he said. "I talked to her in a dream. It was her idea, and . . . it was a good one." I didn't really like how that seemed to come as a surprise to him. "Besides, you kind of put her in a bad situation too. She kept going on about how much the town she's in sucks."

"Okay," snapped Lissa, ignoring the part about my plight. "Supposing that's true, that Rose passes this 'brilliant' idea on to you, then why didn't anyone bother *to tell me*? Didn't you think a little warning might help?" Again, it was just like me complaining about how my jailbreak had been kept a secret from me.

"Not really," said Adrian. "We figured you'd react exactly like this and have time to plan a refusal. We kind of gambled that if you were caught on the spot, you'd accept."

"That was kind of risky," she said.

"But it worked," came Tasha's blunt response. "We knew you'd come through for us." She winked. "And for what it's worth, I think you'd make a great queen."

Lissa gave her a sharp look, and I made one more attempt to drag away some of the darkness. I concentrated on those churning emotions, imagining them in me instead of her. I didn't pull it all but managed enough to take the fight out of her. Rage suddenly flared in me, blinding me momentarily, but I was able to push it off to a corner of my mind. She suddenly felt exhausted. I kind of did too.

"The first test is tomorrow," she said quietly. "If I fail it, I'm out. The plan falls apart."

Christian made another attempt to put his arm around her, and this time, she let him. "You won't."

Lissa didn't say anything else, and I could see the relief on everyone's faces.

No one believed for a second she liked this, but they seemed to think she wasn't going to withdraw her nomination, which was as much as they could hope for.

My mother and Eddie had said nothing this entire time. As was common for guardians, they'd kept to the background, remaining shadows while Moroi business was conducted. With the initial storm passing over, my mother stepped forward. She nodded toward Eddie. "One of us is going to try to stay near you at all times."

"Why?" asked Lissa, startled.

"Because we know there's someone out there who isn't afraid to kill to get what they want," said Tasha. She nodded toward Eddie and my mom. "These two and Mikhail are really the only guardians we can trust."

"Are you sure?" Abe gave Tasha a sly look. "I'm surprised you didn't get your special guardian ‘friend' on board."

"What special friend?" demanded Christian, instantly picking up on the insinuation.

Tasha, to my astonishment, flushed. "Just a guy I know."

"Who follows you with puppy-dog eyes," continued Abe. "What's his name? Evan?"

"Ethan," she corrected.

My mother, looking exasperated by such ridiculous talk, promptly put an end to it—which was just as well since Christian looked like he had a few things to say. "Leave her alone," she warned Abe. "We don't have time for it. Ethan's a good guy, but the fewer people who know about this, the better. Since Mikhail has a permanent post, Eddie and I will do security."

I agreed with all of what she'd just said, but it struck me that to get my mother on board, someone—probably Abe—had filled her in on all the illicit activity that had occurred recently. He was either really convincing or she loved me a lot. Grudgingly, I suspected both were true. When Moroi were at Court, their guardians didn't need to accompany them everywhere, meaning my mom would most likely be free of her assignment while Lord Szelsky stayed here. Eddie didn't have an assignment yet, which also gave him flexibility.

Lissa started to say something else when a sharp jolt in my own reality snapped me away from her.

"Sorry," said Sydney. Her slamming on the brakes was what had brought me back. "That jerk cut me off."

It wasn't Sydney's fault, but I felt irritated at the interruption and wanted to yell at her. With a deep breath, I reminded myself that I was simply feeling spirit's side effects and that I couldn't allow it to make me act irrationally. It would fade, like always, yet some part of me knew I couldn't keep taking that darkness from Lissa forever. I wouldn't always be able to control it.

Now that I was back to myself, I looked out the windows, taking in our new surroundings. We weren't in the mountains anymore. We'd reached an urban area, and while the traffic was hardly heavy (seeing as it was still the middle of the human night), there were definitely more cars on the road than we'd seen in a while.

"Where are we?" I asked.

"Outskirts of Lexington," Sydney said. She pulled over to a nearby gas station, both to refill and so we could plug Donovan's address into her GPS. His place was about five miles away.

"Not a great part of town, from what I hear," Dimitri said. "Donovan runs a tattoo parlor that's only open at night. A couple of other Strigoi work with him. They get partiers, drunk kids . . . the kind of people that can easily disappear. The kind Strigoi love."

"Seems like the police would eventually notice that every time someone went for a tattoo, they disappeared," I pointed out.

Dimitri gave a harsh laugh. "Well, the 'funny' thing is that they don't kill everyone who comes in. They actually give tattoos to some of them and let them go. They smuggle drugs through the place too."

I regarded him curiously, as Sydney slipped back into the car. "You sure know a lot."

"I made it my business to know a lot, and Strigoi have to keep a roof over their heads too. I actually met Donovan once and got most of this straight from the source. I just didn't know where exactly he worked out of until now."

"Okay, so, we've got the info on him. What do we do with it?"

"Lure him out. Send in a 'customer' with a message from me needing to meet him. I'm not the kind of person he can ignore—well, that he used to not—never mind. Once he's out, we get him to a place *we* choose."

I nodded. "I can do that."

"No," said Dimitri. "You can't."

"Why not?" I asked, wondering if he thought it was too dangerous for me.

"Because they'll know you're a dhampir the instant they see you. They'll probably smell it first. No Strigoi would have a dhampir working for him—only humans."

There was an uncomfortable silence in the car.

"No!" said Sydney. "I am *not* doing that!"

Dimitri shook his head. "I don't like it either, but we don't have a lot of options. If he thinks you work for me, he won't hurt you."

"Yeah? And what happens if he doesn't believe me?" she demanded.

"I don't think he can take the chance. He'll probably go with you to check things out, with the idea that if you're lying, they'll just kill you then."

This didn't seem to make her feel any better. She groaned.

"You can't send her in," I said. "They'll know she's an Alchemist. One of those wouldn't work for Strigoi either."

Surprisingly, Dimitri hadn't considered that. We grew quiet again, and it was Sydney who unexpectedly came up with a solution.

"When I was inside the gas station," she said slowly, "they had, like, one rack of makeup. We could probably cover most of my tattoo up with powder."

And we did. The only compact the station sold wasn't a great match for her skin tone, but we caked enough of it on to obscure the golden lily on her cheek. Brushing her hair forward helped a little. Satisfied we'd done all we could, we headed off to Donovan's.

It was indeed in a rundown part of town. A few blocks away from the tattoo parlor, we spotted what looked like a nightclub, but otherwise, the neighborhood appeared deserted. I wasn't fooled, though. This was no place

you'd want to walk around alone at night. It screamed "mugging." Or worse.

We checked out the area until Dimitri found a spot he felt good about. It was a back alley two buildings away from the parlor. A gnarled wired fence stood on one side while a low brick building flanked the other. Dimitri instructed Sydney on how to lead the Strigoi to us. She took it all in, nodding along, but I could see the fear in her eyes.

"You want to look awed," he told her. "Humans who serve Strigoi worship them—they're eager to please. Since they're around Strigoi so much, they aren't as startled or terrified. Still a little afraid, of course, but not as much as you look now."

She swallowed. "I can't really help it."

I felt bad for her. She strongly believed all vampires were evil, and we were sending her into a nest of the worst kind, putting her at great risk. I knew also that she'd only ever seen one live Strigoi, and despite Dimitri's coaching, seeing more could completely shell shock her. If she froze in front of Donovan, everything could fall apart. On impulse, I gave her a hug. To my surprise, she didn't resist.

"You can do this," I said. "You're strong—and they're too afraid of Dimitri. Okay?"

After a few deep breaths, Sydney nodded. We gave her a few more encouraging words, and then she turned the corner of the building, heading toward the street, and disappeared from our sight. I glanced at Dimitri.

"We may have just sent her to her death."

His face was grim. "I know—but we can't do anything now. You'd better get into position."

With his help, I managed to make it onto the roof of the low building. There was nothing intimate in the way he hoisted me up, but I couldn't help but have the same electric feeling all contact with him caused or note how easily we worked together. Once I was securely positioned, Dimitri headed for the opposite side of the building Sydney had gone around. He lurked just around the corner, and then there was nothing to do but wait.

It was agonizing—and not just because we were on the verge of a fight. I kept thinking about Sydney, what we'd asked her to do. My job was to protect the innocent from evil—not thrust them into the middle of it. What if our plan failed? Several minutes passed, and I finally heard footsteps and muttered voices at the same time a familiar wave of nausea moved through me. We'd pulled the Strigoi out.

Three of them walked around the building's corner, Sydney in the lead. They came to a halt, and I spotted Donovan. He was the tallest—a former Moroi—with dark hair and a beard that reminded me of Abe's. Dimitri had given me his description so I wouldn't (hopefully) kill him. Donovan's henchmen hovered behind him, all of them alert and on guard. I tensed, my stake gripped tightly in my right hand.

"Belikov?" demanded Donovan, voice harsh. "Where are you?"

"I'm here," came Dimitri's response—in that cold, terrible Strigoi voice. He appeared from around the building's opposite corner, keeping to the shadows.

Donovan relaxed slightly, recognizing Dimitri—but even in darkness, Dimitri's true appearance materialized. Donovan went rigid—suddenly seeing

a threat, even if it was one that confused him and defied what he knew. At the exact same moment, one of his guys jerked his head around. "Dhampirs!" he exclaimed. It wasn't Dimitri's features that tipped him off. It was our scent, and I breathed a silent prayer of thanks that it had taken them this long to notice.

Then, I leapt off the roof. It wasn't an easy distance to jump—but not one that would kill me. Plus, my fall was broken by a Strigoi.

I landed on one of Donovan's guys, knocking him to the ground. I aimed my stake at his heart, but his reflexes were quick. With my lighter weight, I was easy to shove off. I'd expected it and managed to keep my footing. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Sydney dropping low and hurrying off out of here, per our instructions. We wanted her away from the crossfire and had told her to go to the car, readying herself to take off if things went bad.

Of course, with Strigoi, things were always bad. Donovan and his other guy had both gone for Dimitri, assessing him as the greater threat. My opponent, judging from his fanged smile, didn't seem to regard me as a threat at all. He lunged toward me, and I dodged away, but not before snaking out a kick that took him in the knee. My hit didn't seem to hurt him, but it did ruin his balance. I made another strike at staking and was thrown off again, hitting the ground hard. My bare legs scraped against the rough cement, tearing skin. Because my jeans had grown too dirty and torn, I'd been forced to wear a pair of shorts from the backpack Sydney had brought me. I ignored the pain, shooting right back up with speed the Strigoi didn't expect. My stake found his heart. The hit wasn't as hard as I would have liked, but it was enough to throw him off, then allowing me to drive the stake in further and finish him. Not even waiting to see him fall, I jerked my stake out and turned toward the others.

I hadn't hesitated once in the battle I'd just fought, but now, I paused at what I saw. Dimitri's face. It was . . . terrifying. Ferocious. He'd had a similar look when he'd defended me at my arrest—that badass warrior god expression that said he could take on hell itself. The way he looked now . . . well, it took that fierceness to a whole new level. This was personal, I realized. Fighting these Strigoi wasn't just about finding Sonya and helping Lissa. This was about redemption, an attempt to destroy his past by destroying the evil directly in his path.

I moved to join him, just as he staked the second henchman. There was power in that strike, much more power than Dimitri needed as he shoved the Strigoi against the brick wall and pierced his heart. It was impossible, but I could imagine that stake going straight through the body and into the wall. Dimitri put more attention and effort into that kill than he should have. He should have responded like I had and immediately turned to the next threat, once the Strigoi was dead. Instead, Dimitri was so fixated on his victim that he didn't notice Donovan taking advantage of the situation. Fortunately for Dimitri, I had his back.

I slammed my body into Donovan's, shoving him away from Dimitri. As I did, I saw Dimitri pull out his stake and then slam the body against the wall again. Meanwhile, I'd successfully drawn Donovan's attention and was now having a difficult time eluding him without killing him.

"Dimitri!" I yelled. "Come help me. I need you!"

I couldn't see what Dimitri was doing, but a few seconds later, he was by my side. With what almost sounded like a roar, he leapt at Donovan, stake out, and knocked the Strigoi to the ground. I breathed a sigh of relief and moved in to help with the restraint. Then, I saw Dimitri line up his stake with Donovan's heart.

"No!" I dropped to the ground, trying to both hold Donovan and push away Dimitri's arm. "We need him! Don't kill him!"

From the look on Dimitri's face, it was unclear if he even heard me. There was death in his eyes. He wanted to kill Donovan. The desire had suddenly taken precedence.

Still trying to hold Donovan with one arm, I smacked Dimitri in the face with my other hand—going for the side I hadn't punched the other night. I don't think he felt the pain in his adrenaline rage, but the hit got his attention. "Don't kill him!" I repeated.

The command made it through to Dimitri. Our struggle, unfortunately, gave Donovan maneuvering room. He started to break free of us, but then, as one, Dimitri and I threw ourselves into holding Donovan. I was reminded of the time I'd questioned Strigoi in Russia. It had taken a whole group of dhampirs to restrain one Strigoi, but Dimitri seemed to have unnatural strength.

"When we were interrogating, we used to—"

My words were interrupted when Dimitri decided to utilize his own method of interrogation. He gripped Donovan by the shoulders and shook him hard, causing the Strigoi to keep hitting his head against the cement.

"Where is Sonya Karp?" roared Dimitri.

"I don't—" began Donovan. But Dimitri had no patience for Strigoi evasion.

"Where is she? I know you know her!"

"I—"

"*Where is she*?"

I saw something on Donovan's face that I'd never seen in a Strigoi before: fear. I'd thought it was an emotion they simply didn't possess. Or, if they did, it was only in the battles they fought with one another. They wouldn't waste time with fear around lowly dhampirs.

But oh, Donovan was scared of Dimitri. And to be honest, I was too.

Those red-ringed eyes were wide—wide, desperate, and terrified. When Donovan blurted out his next words, something told me they were true. His fear wasn't giving him a chance to lie. He was too shocked and unprepared by all of this.

"Paris," he gasped out. "She's in Paris!"

"Christ," I exclaimed. "We *cannot* road trip to Paris."

Donovan shook his head (in as much as he could with Dimitri shaking him in return). "It's a small town—an hour away. There's this tiny lake. Hardly anyone on it. Blue house."

Vague directions. We needed more. "Do you have an addr—"

Dimitri apparently didn't share my need for more information. Before I could finish speaking, his stake was out—and in Donovan's heart. The Strigoi made a horrible, blood-curdling scream that faded as death took him. I winced. How long until someone heard all this and called the police?

Dimitri pulled his stake out—and then stabbed Donovan again. And again. I stared in disbelief and horror, frozen for a few moments. Then, I grabbed Dimitri's arm and began shaking him, though I felt like I would have had more effect shaking the building behind me.

"He's dead, Dimitri! He's dead! Stop this. Please."

Dimitri's face still wore that terrible, terrible expression—rage, now marked with a bit of desperation. Desperation that told him if he could only obliterate Donovan, then maybe he could obliterate everything else bad in his life.

I didn't know what to do. We had to get out of here. We had to get Sydney to disintegrate the bodies. Time was ticking, and I just kept repeating myself.

"He's dead! Let it go. *Please*. He's dead."

Then, somewhere, somehow, I broke through to Dimitri. His motions slowed and finally stopped. The hand holding the stake dropping weakly to his side as he stared at what was left of Donovan—which wasn't pretty. The rage on Dimitri's face completely gave way to desperation . . . and then that gave way to despair.

I tugged gently on his arm. "It's over. You've done enough."

"It's never enough, Roza," he whispered. The grief in his voice killed me. "It'll never be enough."

"It is for now," I said. I pulled him to me. Unresisting, he let go of his stake and buried his face against my shoulder. I dropped my stake as well and embraced him, drawing him closer. He wrapped his arms around me in return, seeking the contact of another living being, the contact I'd long known he needed.

"You're the only one." He clung more tightly to me. "The only one who understands. The only one who saw how I was. I could never explain it to anyone . . . you're the only one. The only one I can tell this to . . ."

I closed my eyes for a moment, overpowered by what he was saying. He might have sworn allegiance to Lissa, but that didn't mean he'd fully revealed his heart to her. For so long, he and I had been in perfect sync, always understanding each other. That was still the case, no matter if we were together, no matter if I was with Adrian. Dimitri had always kept his heart and feelings guarded until meeting me. I thought he'd locked them back up, but apparently, he still trusted me enough to reveal what was killing him inside.

I opened my eyes and met his dark, earnest gaze. "It's okay," I said. "It's okay now. I'm here. I'll always be here for you."

"I dream about them, you know. All the innocents I killed." His eyes drifted back to Donovan's body. "I keep thinking . . . maybe if I destroy enough Strigoi, the nightmares will go away. That I'll be certain I'm not one of them."

I touched his chin, turning his face back toward mine and away from Donovan. "No. You have to destroy Strigoi because they're evil. Because that's what we do. If you want the nightmares to go away, you have to *live*. That's the only way. We could have died just now. We didn't. Maybe we'll die tomorrow. I don't know. What matters is that we're alive now."

I was rambling at this point. I had never seen Dimitri so low, not since his restoration. He'd claimed being Strigoi had killed so many of his emotions. It hadn't. They were there, I realized. Everything he had been was still inside, only coming out in bursts—like this moment of rage and despair. Or when

he'd defended me from the arresting guardians. The old Dimitri wasn't gone. He was just locked away, and I didn't know how to let him out. This wasn't what I did. He was always the one with words of wisdom and insight. Not me. Still, he was listening now. I had his attention. What could I say? What could get through to him?

"Remember what you said earlier?" I asked. "Back in Rubysville? Living is in the details. You've got to appreciate the details. That's the only way to defeat what the Strigoi did to you. The only way to bring back who you really are. You said it yourself: you escaped with me to feel the world again. Its beauty."

Dimitri started to turn toward Donovan again, but I wouldn't let him. "There's nothing beautiful here. Only death."

"That's only true if you let *them* make it true," I said desperately, still feeling the press of time. "Find one thing. One thing that's beautiful. Anything. Anything that shows you're not one of them."

His eyes were back on me, studying my face silently. Panic raced through me. It wasn't working. I couldn't do this. We were going to have to get out of here, regardless of whatever state he was in. I knew he'd leave, too. If I'd learned anything, it was that Dimitri's warrior instincts were still working. If I said danger was coming, he would respond instantly, no matter the self-torment he felt. I didn't want that, though. I didn't want him to leave in despair. I wanted him to leave here one step closer to being the man I knew he could be. I wanted him to have one less nightmare.

It was beyond my abilities, though. I was no therapist. I was about to tell him we had to get out there, about to make his soldier reflexes kick in, when he suddenly spoke. His voice was barely a whisper. "Your hair."

"What?" For a second, I wondered if it was on fire or something. I touched a stray lock. No, nothing wrong except that it was a mess. I'd bound it up for battle to prevent the Strigoi from using it as a handhold, like Angeline had. Much of it had come undone in the struggle, though.

"Your hair," repeated Dimitri. His eyes were wide, almost awestruck. "Your hair is beautiful."

I didn't think so, not in its current state. Of course, considering we were in a dark alley filled with bodies, the choices were kind of limited. "You see? You're not one of them. Strigoi don't see beauty. Only death. You found something beautiful. One thing that's beautiful."

Hesitantly, nervously, he ran his fingers along the strands I'd touched earlier. "But is it enough?"

"It is for now." I pressed a kiss to his forehead and helped him stand. "It is for now."

SIXTEEN

CONSIDERING SYDNEY DESTROYED dead bodies on a regular basis, it was kind of surprising that she was so shocked by our post-fight appearances. Maybe dead Strigoi were just objects to her. Dimitri and I were real live people, and we were a mess.

"I hope you guys don't stain the car," she said, once the bodies were disposed of and we were on our way. I think it was her best attempt at a joke, in an effort to cover up her discomfort over our torn and bloody clothes.

"Are we going to Paris?" I asked, turning to look back at Dimitri.

"Paris?" asked Sydney, startled.

"Not yet," said Dimitri, leaning his head back against the seat. He was back to looking like a controlled guardian. All signs of his earlier breakdown were gone, and I had no intention of giving away what had happened before we'd fetched Sydney. So small . . . yet so monumental. And very private. For now, he mostly looked tired. "We should wait until daytime. We had to go for Donovan now, but if Sonya's got a house, she's probably there all the time. Safer for us in daylight."

"How do you know he wasn't lying?" asked Sydney. She was driving with no real destination, merely getting us out of the neighborhood as fast as possible and before people reported screams and the sounds of fighting.

I thought back to the terror on Donovan's face and shivered. "I don't think he was lying."

Sydney didn't ask any more questions, except about which direction she should drive. Dimitri suggested we find another hotel so that we could clean up and get some rest before tomorrow's task. Fortunately, Lexington had a much broader selection of hotels than our last town. We didn't go for luxury, but the large, modern-looking place we chose was part of a chain, clean and stylish. Sydney checked us in and then led us inside through a side door, so as not to startle any guests who might be up in the middle of the night.

We got one room with two double beds. No one commented on it, but I think we all shared a need to stay together after our earlier Strigoi encounter. Dimitri was much more of a mess than me, thanks to his mutilation of Donovan, so I sent him to shower first.

"You did great," I told Sydney as we waited. I sat on the floor (which was much cleaner than the last room's) so that I wouldn't wreck the beds. "That was really brave of you."

She crooked me a smile. "Typical. You get beat up and nearly killed, but I'm

the one you're praising?"

"Hey, I do this all the time. Going in there alone like you did . . . well, it was pretty hardcore. And I'm not *that* beat up."

I was brushing off my injuries, just as Dimitri would. Sydney, eyeing me, knew it too. My legs were scraped more than I'd realized, the skin torn and bleeding from where I'd fallen on the cement. One of my ankles was complaining over the roof-jump, and I had a number of cuts and bruises scattered over the rest of me. I had no clue where most had come from.

Sydney shook her head. "How you guys don't catch gangrene more often is beyond me." We both knew why, though. It was part of the natural resistance I'd been born with as a dhampir, getting the best of both races' traits. Moroi were actually pretty healthy too, though they sometimes caught diseases unique to their race. Victor was an example. He had a chronic disease and had once forced Lissa to heal him. Her magic had restored him to full health at the time, but the illness was slowly creeping back.

I showered after Dimitri finished, and then Sydney forced her first aid kit on both of us. When we were bandaged and disinfected to her satisfaction, she got out her laptop and pulled up a map of Paris, Kentucky. The three of us huddled around the screen.

"Lots of creeks and rivers," she mused, scrolling around. "Not much in the way of lakes."

I pointed. "Do you think that's it?" It was a tiny body of water, marked APPLEWOOD POND.

"Maybe. Ah, there's another pond. That could be a suspect too or—oh! Right here?" She tapped the screen on another body of water, a bit bigger than the ponds: MARTIN LAKE.

Dimitri sat back and ran a hand over his eyes as he yawned. "That looks like the most likely option. If not, I don't think it'll take long to drive around the other ones."

"That's your plan?" asked Sydney. "Just drive around and look for a blue house?"

I exchanged glances with Dimitri and shrugged. Sydney might be showing her bravery on this trip, but I knew her idea of "a plan" was a little different from ours. Hers were structured, well-thought out, and had a clear purpose. Also, details.

"It's more solid than most of our plans," I said at last.

The sun was going to be up in another hour or so. I was restless to go after Sonya, but Dimitri insisted sleep until midday. He took one bed, and Sydney and I shared the other. I didn't really think I needed the rest he claimed, but my body disagreed. I fell asleep almost instantly.

And like always lately, I eventually was pulled into a spirit dream. I hoped it was Adrian, coming to finish our last conversation. Instead, the conservatory materialized around me, complete with harp and cushioned furniture. I sighed and faced the Brothers Dashkov.

"Great," I said. "Another conference call. I have *really* got to start blocking your number."

Victor gave me a small bow. "Always a pleasure, Rose." Robert merely stared off into space again. Nice to know some things never changed.

"What do you want?" I demanded.

"You know what we want. We're here to help you help Vasilisa." I didn't believe that for an instant. Victor had some scheme in mind, but my hope was to capture him before he could do any further damage. He studied me expectantly. "Have you found the other Dragomir yet?"

I stared incredulously. "It's only been a day!" I almost had to redo my math on that one. It felt more like ten years. Nope. Only a day since I'd last spoken to Victor.

"And?" Victor asked.

"And, how good do you think we are?"

He considered. "Pretty good."

"Well, thanks for the vote of confidence, but it's not as easy as it seems. And actually . . . considering what a cover-up this has all been, it really doesn't seem easy at all."

"But you have found something?" Victor pressed.

I didn't answer.

An eager gleam lit his eyes, and he took a step forward. I promptly took one back. "You *have* found something."

"Maybe." Again, I had the same indecision as before. Did Victor, with all his scheming and manipulating, know something that could help us? Last time, he'd given me nothing, but now we had more information. What had he said? If we found a thread, he could unravel it?

"Rose." Victor was speaking to me like I was a child, as he often did to Robert. It made me scowl. "I told you before: It doesn't matter if you trust me or my intentions. For now, we're both interested in the same short-term goal. Don't let future worries ruin your chance here."

It was funny, but that was similar to the principle I'd operated on for most of my life. Live in the now. Jump right in and worry about the consequences later. Now, I hesitated and tried to think things over before making a decision. At last, I chose to take the risk, again hoping Victor might be able to help.

"We think the mother . . . the mother of Lissa's brother or sister . . . is related to Sonya Karp." Victor's eyebrows rose. "You know who that is?"

"Of course. She turned Strigoi—allegedly because she went insane. But we both know it was a little more complicated than that."

I nodded reluctantly. "She was a spirit user. No one knew."

Robert's head whipped around so fast that I nearly jumped. "Who's a spirit user?"

"*Former* spirit user," said Victor, instantly switching to soothing mode. "She became a Strigoi to get away from it."

The sharp focus Robert had directed toward the two of us melted into soft dreaminess once more. "Yes . . . always a lure to that . . . kill to live, live to kill. Immortality and freedom from these chains, but oh, what a loss . . ."

They were crazy ramblings, but they had an eerie similarity to some of the things Adrian said sometimes. I didn't like that at all. Trying to pretend Robert wasn't in the room, I turned back to Victor. "Do you know anything about her? Who she's related to?"

He shook his head. "She has a large family."

I threw up my hands in exasperation. "Could you be any more useless? You

keep acting like you know so much, but you're just telling us what we've already found out! You aren't helping!"

"Help comes in many forms, Rose. Have you found Sonya?"

"Yes." I reconsidered. "Well, not quite. We know where she is. We're going to see her tomorrow and question her."

The look on Victor's face spoke legions about how ridiculous he thought that was. "And I'm sure she'll be eager to help."

I shrugged. "Dimitri's pretty persuasive."

"So I've heard," said Victor. "But Sonya Karp isn't an impressionable teenager." I sized up a punch but worried Robert might have his force field up again. Victor appeared oblivious to my anger. "Tell me where you are. We'll come to you."

Once more, a dilemma. I didn't think there was much the brothers could do. But this might present an opportunity to recapture him. Besides, if we had him in person, maybe he'd stop interrupting my dreams.

"We're in Kentucky," I said at last. "Paris, Kentucky." I gave him what other info we had about the blue house.

"We'll be there tomorrow," Victor said.

"Then where are you now—"

And just like last time, Robert ended the dream abruptly, leaving me hanging. What had I gotten myself into with them? Before I could consider it, I was immediately taken to another spirit dream. Good Lord. It really was déjà vu. Everyone wanted to talk to me in my sleep. Fortunately, like last time, my second visit was from Adrian.

This one was in the ballroom where the Council had met. There were no chairs or people, and my steps echoed on the hard wood floor. The room that seemed so grand and powerful when in use now had a lonely, ominous feel.

Adrian stood near one of the tall, arched windows, giving me one of his roguish smiles when I hugged him. Compared to how dirty and bloody everything was in the real world, he seemed pristine and perfect.

"You did it." I gave him a quick kiss on the lips. "You got them to nominate Lissa." After our last dream visit, when I'd realized there might be some merit to Victor's suggestion, I'd had to work hard to convince Adrian that the nomination idea was a good one—particularly since I hadn't been sure myself.

"Yeah, getting that group on board was easy." He seemed to like my admiration, but his face grew grimmer as he pondered my words. "She's not happy about it, though. Boy, she let us have it afterward."

"I saw it. You're right that she doesn't like it—but it was more than that. It was spirit-darkness. I took some of it away, but yeah . . . it was bad." I remembered how taking her anger had caused it to flare up briefly in me. Spirit didn't hit me as hard as it did her—but that was only temporary. Eventually, if I pulled enough over the years, it would take over. I caught hold of Adrian's hand and gave him as pleading a look as I could manage. "You've got to look after her. I'll do what I can, but you know as well as I do how stress and worry can agitate spirit. I'm afraid it'll come back like it used to. I wish I could be there to take care of her. Please—help her."

He tucked a loose piece of hair behind my ear, concern in his deep green eyes. At first, I thought his worry was just for Lissa. "I will," he said. "I'll do

what I can. But Rose . . . will it happen to me? Is that what I'll become? Like her and the others?"

Adrian had never shown the extreme side effects Lissa had, largely because he didn't use as much spirit and because he did so much self-medicating with alcohol. I didn't know how long that would last, though. From what I'd seen, there were only a few things to delay the insanity: self-discipline, antidepressants, and bonding to someone shadow-kissed. Adrian didn't seem interested in any of those options.

It was weird, but in this moment of vulnerability, I was reminded of what had just happened with Dimitri. Both of these men, so strong and confident in their ways, yet each needing me for support. *You're the strong one, Rose*, a voice whispered inside my head.

Adrian gazed off. "Sometimes . . . sometimes I can believe the insanity is all imagined, you know? I've never felt it like the others . . . like Lissa or old Vlad. But once in a while . . ." he paused. "I don't know. I feel so close, Rose. So close to the edge. Like if I allow myself one small misstep, I'll plunge away and never come back. It's like I'll lose myself."

I'd heard him say stuff like this before, when he'd go off on some weird tangent that only half made sense. It was the closest he ever came to showing that spirit might be messing with his mind too. I'd never realized he was aware of these moments or what they could mean.

He looked back down at me. "When I drink . . . I don't worry about it. I don't worry about going crazy. But then I think . . . maybe I already I am. Maybe I am, but no one can tell the difference when I'm drunk."

"You're not crazy," I said fiercely, pulling him to me. I loved his warmth and the way he felt against my skin. "You'll be okay. You're strong."

He pressed his cheek to my forehead. "I don't know," he said. "I think you're my strength."

It was a sweet and romantic statement, but something about it bothered me. "That's not quite right," I said, wondering how I could put my feelings into words. I knew you could help someone else in a relationship. You could strengthen them and support them. But you couldn't actually do *everything* for them. You couldn't solve all their problems. "You have to find it within your —"

The hotel room's alarm clock blared and broke me from the dream, leaving me frustrated both because I missed Adrian and hadn't been able to say all I wanted to. Well, there was nothing I could do for him now. I could only hope he'd manage on his own.

Sydney and I were both sluggish and squinty-eyed. It made sense that she'd be exhausted, since her whole sleeping schedule—when she actually got sleep —had been thrown off. Me? My fatigue was mental. So many people, I thought. So many people needed me . . . but it was so hard to help all of them.

Naturally, Dimitri was up and ready to go. He'd woken before us. Last night's breakdown might as well have never happened. It turned out he'd been dying for coffee and had patiently waited for us, not wanting to leave us sleeping and undefended. I shooed him off, and twenty minutes later, he returned with coffee and a box of donuts. He also had purchased an industrial-strength chain at a hardware store across the street "for when we find Sonya,"

which made me uneasy. By then Sydney and I were ready to go, and I decided to hold off on my questions. I wasn't crazy about wearing shorts again, not with my legs in this condition, but I was too eager to get to Sonya to insist we stop at a mall.

I did, however, decide it was time to get my companions up to speed.

"So," I began casually, "Victor Dashkov might be joining us soon."

It was to Sydney's credit that she didn't drive off the road. "*What*? That guy who escaped?"

I could see in Dimitri's eyes that he was just as shocked, but he kept cool and under control, like always. "Why," he began slowly, "is Victor Dashkov joining us?"

"Well, it's kind of a funny story . . ."

And with that intro, I gave them as brief yet thorough a recap as I could, starting with the background on Robert Doru and ending with the brothers' recent dream visits. I glossed over Victor's "mysterious" escape a few weeks ago, but something told me that Dimitri, in that uncanny way we had of guessing each other's thoughts, was probably putting the pieces together. Both Lissa and I had told Dimitri we'd gone through a lot to learn how to restore him, but we'd never explained the full story—especially the part about breaking out Victor so that he could help us find his brother.

"Look, whether he can help or not, this is our chance to catch him," I added hastily. "That's a good thing, right?"

"It's an issue we'll deal with . . . later." I recognized the tone in Dimitri's voice. He'd used it a lot at St. Vladimir's. It usually meant there was a private talk in my future, where I'd be grilled for more details.

Kentucky turned out to be pretty beautiful as we drove out to Paris. The land was rolling and green as we got out of the city, and it was easy to imagine wanting to live in a little house out here. I wondered idly if that had been Sonya's motivation and then caught myself. I'd just told Dimitri that Strigoi saw no beauty. Was I wrong? Would gorgeous scenery matter to her?

I found my answer when our GPS led us to Martin Lake. There were only a few houses scattered around it, and among those, only one was blue. Stopping a fair distance away from the house, Sydney parked the car off to the side of the road as much as she could. It was narrow, the shoulders covered in trees and high grass. We all got out of the car and walked a little ways, still keeping our distance.

"Well. It's a blue house," declared Sydney pragmatically. "But is it hers? I don't see a mailbox or anything."

I looked closer at the yard. Rose bushes, full of pink and red blossoms, grew in front of the porch. Baskets thick with white flowers I didn't know the names of hung from the roof, and blue morning glories climbed up a trellis. Around the house, I could just barely make out a wood fence. A vine with orange, trumpet-shaped flowers crawled over it.

Then, an image flickered into my mind, gone as quickly as it had come. Ms. Karp watering pots of flowers in her classroom, flowers that seemed to grow impossibly fast and tall. As a teenager more interested in dodging homework, I hadn't thought much about them. It was only later, after watching Lissa make plants grow and bloom during spirit experiments, that I understood what had

been happening in Ms. Karp's classroom. And now, even deprived of spirit and possessed by evil, Sonya Karp was still tending her flowers.

"Yeah," I said. "This is her house." Dimitri approached the front porch, studying every detail. I started to follow but held back. "What are you doing?" I kept my voice low. "She might see you."

He returned to my side. "Those are black-out curtains. They aren't letting in any light, so she isn't going to see anything. It also means she likely spends her time on the house's main floor, rather than a basement."

I could easily follow his line of thinking. "That's good news for us." When I'd been captured by Strigoi last year, my friends and I had been held in a basement. Not only was it convenient for Strigoi wanting to avoid the sun, it also meant fewer escape and entry options. It was easy for Strigoi to trap prey in a basement. The more doors and windows we had, the better.

"I'll scout the other side," he said, starting for the backyard.

I hurried up to him and caught him by the arm. "Let me. I'll sense any Strigoi—not that she's going outside, but, well, just in case."

He hesitated, and I grew irate, thinking he didn't believe me capable. Then, he said, "Okay. Be careful." I realized he was just worried about me.

I moved as smoothly and quietly as I could around the house, soon discovering the wooden fence was going to create difficulty in seeing the backyard. I feared climbing over might alert Sonya to my presence and pondered what to do. My solution came in the form of a large rock lying near the fence's edge. I dragged the stone over and stood on top. It wasn't enough to let me look completely over, but I was able to easily put my hands on top of the fence and hoist myself up for a peek with minimal noise.

It was like looking into the Garden of Eden. The flowers in the front had merely been the warm-up act. More roses, magnolia and apple trees, irises, and a billion other flowers I didn't recognize. Sonya's backyard was a paradise of lush color. I scoped out what I needed to and hurried back to Dimitri. Sydney still stood by the car.

"A patio door and two windows," I reported. "All curtained. There's also a wooden deck chair, a shovel, and a wheelbarrow."

"Any pitchforks?"

"Unfortunately, no, but there's a big-ass rock sitting outside the fence. It'd be hard to get it into the yard, though. We're better off using it to help us climb over. No gate in the fence. She's made a fortress."

He nodded in understanding, and without any conversation, I knew what to do. We got the chain from the car and entrusted it to Sydney. We told her to wait for us outside—with the strict instructions to leave if we weren't back in thirty minutes. I hated to say that kind of thing—and Sydney's face indicated she didn't like hearing it—but it was inevitable. If we hadn't subdued Sonya in that amount of time, we weren't going to subdue her at all—or leave alive. If we did manage to overtake her, we'd give some signal for Sydney to come in with the chain.

Sydney's amber-brown eyes were filled with anxiety as she watched us head back around the house. I nearly teased her for caring about evil creatures of the night but stopped myself just in time. She might loathe every other dhampir and Moroi in the world, but somewhere along the way, she'd come to

like Dimitri and me. That wasn't something to mock.

Dimitri stood on the rock and surveyed the yard. He murmured a few last-minute instructions to me before taking my hands and boosting me up over the fence. His height went a long way to make the maneuver as easy and quiet—though not silent—as possible. He followed me shortly thereafter, landing beside me with a small thud.

After that, we sprang forward with no delay. If Sonya had heard us, then there was no point in wasting time. We needed every advantage we could get. Dimitri grabbed the shovel and swung it hard into the glass—once, twice. The first strike was about the height of my head, the second lower. The glass fractured more with each impact. Right on the heels of the second hit, I pushed forward and shoved the wheelbarrow into the door. Lifting it and throwing it against the glass would have been a lot cooler, but it was too unwieldy to raise very high. When the wheelbarrow struck the already weakened glass, the cracked areas broke and crumbled altogether, creating a hole big enough for both of us to get through. We both had to duck—especially Dimitri.

A simultaneous attack through both sides of the house would have been ideal, but it wasn't like Sonya could run out the front door. Nausea had started to creep over me as soon as we were near the patio, and the sensation hit full force as we entered a living room. I ignored my stomach in the way I'd perfected and braced myself for what was to come. We'd broken in pretty quickly but not quickly enough to truly get the jump on Strigoi reflexes.

Sonya Karp was right there, ready for us, doing all she could to avoid the sunlight spilling into the living room. When I'd first seen Dimitri as a Strigoi, I'd been so shocked that I'd frozen up. It had allowed him to capture me, so I'd mentally braced myself this time, knowing I'd feel the same shock when I saw my former teacher as a Strigoi. And it *was* shocking. Just like with him, so many of Sonya's features were the same as before: the auburn hair and high cheek bones . . . but her beauty was twisted by all the other terrible conditions: chalky skin, red eyes, and the expression of cruelty that all Strigoi seemed to wear.

If she recognized us, she gave no sign and lunged toward Dimitri with a snarl. It was a common Strigoi tactic to take out the bigger threat first, and it annoyed me that they always believed that was Dimitri. He'd shoved his stake in his belt in order to carry the shovel inside with him. The shovel wouldn't kill a Strigoi, but with enough strength and momentum, it would definitely keep Sonya at arm's length. He struck her with it in the shoulder after her first attempt, and while she didn't fall over, she definitely waited before trying another attack. They circled each other, like wolves readying for a battle, as she sized up her odds. One charge, and her greater strength would push him down, shovel or not.

All of this took place in a matter of seconds, and Sonya's calculations had left me out of the equation. I made my own charge, slamming into her other side, but she saw me coming out of the corner of her eye and responded instantly, throwing me down while never taking her eyes off Dimitri. I wished I had the shovel and could hit her in the back from a safe distance. All I carried was my stake, and I had to be careful with it since it could kill her. I

did a quick scan of her eerily normal living room and couldn't see any other potential weapons.

She feinted, and Dimitri went for it. He just barely corrected himself as she leapt forward to take advantage of the situation. She thrust him against the wall, pinning him there and knocking the shovel from his grasp. He struggled against her, trying to break free as her hands found his throat. If I tried to pull her off, my strength combined with Dimitri's would probably free him. I wanted this over as quickly as possible, however, and decided to make a power play.

I ran toward her, stake in hand, and plunged it through her right shoulder blade, hoping I was nowhere near her heart. The charmed silver, so agonizing to Strigoi skin, made her scream. Frantic, she shoved me away with force that was astonishing even for a Strigoi. I fell backward, stumbling, and whacked my head against a coffee table. My vision dimmed slightly, but instinct and adrenaline drove me back to my feet.

My attack gave Dimitri the split second he needed. He knocked Sonya to the ground and grabbed my stake, pushing it against her throat. She screamed and flailed, and I moved forward to help him, knowing how hard it was to pin a Strigoi.

"Get Sydney . . ." he grunted. "The chain . . ."

I moved as quickly as I could, stars and shadows dancing in front of me. I unlocked the front door and kicked it open as a signal, then ran back to Dimitri. Sonya was making good progress in fighting him off. I dropped to my knees, working with Dimitri to keep her restrained. He had that battle lust in his eyes again, a look that said he wanted to destroy her right here and now. But there was something else, too. Something that made me think he had more control, that my words in the alley had actually had an impact. Still, I uttered a warning.

"We need her . . . remember we need her."

He gave me a slight nod, just as Sydney showed up lugging the chain. She stared at the scene wide-eyed, pausing only a moment before hurrying over to us. *We'll make a warrior of her yet*, I thought.

Dimitri and I moved to our next task. We'd already spotted the best place to bind Sonya: a heavy, reclining armchair in the corner. Lifting her—which was dangerous since she was still thrashing wildly—we thrust her into the chair. Then, keeping the stake at her neck, Dimitri attempted to hold her down while I grabbed hold of the chain.

There was no time to think of a precise system. I just started wrapping it, first around her legs and then as best as I could around her torso, trying to lock her arms against her. Dimitri had bought *a lot* of chain, thankfully, and I hurriedly wrapped it around the chair in a crazy manner, doing everything I could to keep her down.

When I finally ran out of chain, Sonya was pretty well locked into place. Was it something she could break out of? Absolutely. But with a silver stake against her? Not so easy. With both in place . . . well, we had her trapped for now. It was the best we could do.

Dimitri and I exchanged brief, weary looks. I felt dizzy but fought through it, knowing our task was far from over.

"Time for questioning," I said grimly.

SEVENTEEN

THE INTERROGATION DIDN'T go so well.

Oh, sure, we made plenty of threats and used the stakes as torture devices, but not much came of it. Dimitri was still scary when dealing with Sonya, but after his breakdown with Donovan, he was careful not to fall into that berserk rage again. This was healthier for him in the long run but not so good for scaring up answers out of Sonya. It didn't help matters that we didn't exactly have a concrete question to ask her. We mostly had a series to throw at her. Did she know about another Dragomir? Was she related to the mother? Where were the mother and child? Things also went bad when Sonya realized we needed her too much to kill her, no matter how much silver stake torture we did.

We'd been at it for over an hour and were getting exhausted. At least, I was. I leaned against a wall near Sonya, and though I had my stake out and ready, I was relying on the wall a bit more than I liked to admit to keep me upright. None of us had spoken in a while. Even Sonya had given up on her snarling threats. She simply waited and stayed watchful, undoubtedly planning for escape, probably figuring we'd tire before she did. That silence was scarier than all the threats in the world. I was used to Strigoi using words to intimidate me. I'd never expected the power simply being quiet and staring menacingly could have.

"What happened to your head, Rose?" asked Dimitri, suddenly catching a glimpse of it.

I'd been tuning out a little and realized he was talking to me. "Huh?" I brushed aside hair that had been obscuring part of my forehead. My fingers came away sticky with blood, triggering vague memories of crashing into the table. I shrugged, ignoring the dizziness I'd been feeling. "I'm fine."

Dimitri gave Sydney the quickest of glances. "Go lay her down and clean it up. Don't let her sleep until we can figure out if it's a concussion."

"No, I can't," I argued. "I can't leave you alone with her . . ."

"I'm fine," he said. "Rest up so that you can help me later. You're no good to me if you're just going to fall over."

I still protested, but when Sydney gently took my arm, my stumbling gave me away. She led me to the house's one bedroom, much to my dismay. There was something creepy about knowing I was in a Strigoi's bed—even if it was covered with a blue-and-white floral quilt.

"Man," I said, lying back against the pillow once Sydney had cleaned my

forehead. Despite my earlier denial, it felt great to rest. "I can't get used to the weirdness of a Strigoi living in a place so . . . normal. How are you holding up?"

"Better than you guys," said Sydney. She wrapped her arms around herself and eyed the room uncomfortably. "Being around Strigoi is starting to make you guys seem not so bad."

"Well, at least some good's come out of this," I remarked. Despite her joke, I knew she had to be terrified. I started to close my eyes and was jolted awake when Sydney poked my arm.

"No sleep," she chastised. "Stay up and talk to me."

"It's not a concussion," I muttered. "But I suppose we can go over plans to get Sonya to talk."

Sydney sat at the foot of the bed and grimaced. "No offense? But I don't think she's going to crack."

"She will once she's gone a few days without blood."

Sydney blanched. "A few days?"

"Well, whatever it takes to—" A spike of emotion flitted through the bond, and I froze. Sydney jumped up, her eyes darting around as though a group of Strigoi might have burst into the room.

"What's wrong?" she exclaimed.

"I have to go to Lissa."

"You're not supposed to sleep—"

"It's not sleeping," I said bluntly. And with that, I jumped away from Sonya's bedroom and into Lissa's perspective.

She was riding in a van with five other people whom I immediately recognized as other royal nominees. It was an eight-person van and also included a guardian driver with another in the passenger seat who was looking back at Lissa and her companions.

"Each of you will be dropped off in a separate location on the outskirts of a forest and given a map and compass. The ultimate goal is for you to reach the destination on the map and wait out the daylight until we come for you."

Lissa and the other nominees exchanged glances and then, almost as one, peered out the van's windows. It was almost noon, and the sunlight was pouring down. "Waiting out the daylight" was not going to be pleasant but didn't sound impossible. Idly, she scratched at a small bandage on her arm and quickly stopped herself. I read from her thoughts what it was: a tiny, barely noticeable dot tattooed into her skin. It was actually similar to Sydney's: blood and earth, mixed with compulsion. Compulsion might be taboo among Moroi, but this was a special situation. The spell in the tattoo prevented the candidates from revealing the monarch tests to others not involved with the process. This was the first test.

"What kind of terrain are you sending us to?" demanded Marcus Lazar. "We're not all in the same physical shape. It's not fair when some of us have an advantage." His eyes were on Lissa as he spoke.

"There *is* a lot of walking," said the guardian, face serious. "But it's nothing that any candidate—of any age—shouldn't be able to handle. And, to be honest, part of the requirements for a king or queen is a certain amount of stamina. Age brings wisdom, but a monarch needs to be healthy. Not an

athlete by any means," added the guardian quickly, seeing Marcus start to open his mouth. "But it's no good for the Moroi to have a sickly monarch elected who dies within a year. Harsh, but true. And you also need to be able to endure uncomfortable situations. If you can't handle a day in the sun, you can't handle a Council meeting." I think he intended that as a joke, but it was hard to tell since he didn't smile. "It's not a race, though. Take your time getting to the end if you need it. Marked along the map are spots where certain items are hidden—items that'll make this more bearable, if you can decipher the clues."

"Can we use our magic?" asked Ariana Szelsky. She wasn't young either, but she looked tough and ready to accept a challenge of endurance.

"Yes, you can," said the guardian solemnly.

"Are we in danger out there?" asked another candidate, Ronald Ozera. "Aside from the sun?"

"That," said the guardian mysteriously, "is something you'll need to learn for yourselves. But, if at any time you want out . . ." He produced a bag of cell phones and distributed them. Maps and compasses followed. "Call the programmed number, and we'll come for you."

Nobody had to ask about the hidden message behind that. Calling the number would get you out of the long day of endurance. It would also mean you'd failed the test and were out of the running for the throne. Lissa glanced at her phone, half-surprised there was even a signal. They'd left Court about an hour ago and were well into the countryside. A line of trees made Lissa think they were nearing their destination.

So. A test of physical endurance. It wasn't quite what she'd expected. The trials a monarch went through had long been shrouded in mystery, gaining an almost mystical reputation. This one was pretty practical, and Lissa could understand the reasoning, even if Marcus didn't. It truly wasn't an athletic competition, and the guardian had a point in saying that the future monarch should possess a certain level of fitness. Glancing at the back of her map, which listed the clues, Lissa realized this would also test their reasoning skills. All very basic stuff—but essential to ruling a nation.

The van dropped them off one by one at different starting points. With each departing candidate, Lissa's anxiety grew. *There's nothing to worry about*, she thought. *I've just got to sit through a sunny day*. She was the next to last person dropped off, with only Ariana remaining behind. Ariana patted Lissa's arm as the van door opened.

"Good luck, dear."

Lissa gave her a quick smile. These tests might all be a ruse on Lissa's part, but Ariana was the real deal, and Lissa prayed the older woman could get through this successfully.

Left alone as the van drove away, unease spread through Lissa. The simple endurance test suddenly seemed much more daunting and difficult. She was on her own, something that didn't happen very often. I'd been there for most of her life, and even when I'd left, she'd had friends around her. But now? It was just her, the map, and the cell phone. And the cell phone was her enemy.

She walked to the edge of the forest and studied her map. A drawing of a large oak tree marked the beginning, with directions to go northwest.

Scanning the trees, Lissa saw three maples, a fir, and—an oak. Heading toward it, she couldn't help a smile. If anyone else had botanical landmarks and didn't know their plants and trees, they could lose candidacy right there.

The compass was a classic one. No digital GPS convenience here. Lissa had never used a compass like this, and the protective part of me wished I could jump in and help. I should have known better, though. Lissa was smart and easily figured it out. Heading northwest, she stepped into the woods. While there was no clear path, the forest's floor wasn't *too* covered with overgrowth or obstacles.

The nice part about being in the forest was that the trees blocked out some of the sun. It still wasn't an ideal Moroi condition, but it beat being dropped in a desert. Birds sang, and the scenery was lush and green. Keeping an eye out for the next landmark, Lissa tried to relax and pretend she was simply on a pleasant hike.

Yet . . . it was difficult to do that with so much on her mind. Abe and our other friends were now in charge of working and asking questions about the murder. All of them were asleep right now—it was the middle of the Moroi night—but Lissa didn't know when she'd return and couldn't help resenting this test for taking up her time. No, *wasting* her time. She'd finally accepted the logic behind her friends' nomination—but she still didn't like it. She wanted to actively help them.

Her churning thoughts almost led her right past her next landmark: a tree that had fallen ages ago. Moss covered it, and much of the wood was rotten. A star on the map marked it as a place with a clue. She flipped over the map and read:

I grow and I shrink. I run and I crawl.
Follow my voice, though I have none at all.
I never do leave here, but I travel around—
I float through the sky and I creep through the ground.
I keep my cache in a vault although I have no wealth,
Seek out my decay to safeguard your health.

Um.

My mind went blank right about then, but Lissa's spun. She read it over and over again, examining the individual words and how each line played off the other. *I never do leave here*. That was the starting point, she decided. Something permanent. She looked around, considered the trees, then dismissed them. They could always be cut and removed. Careful not to stray too far from the fallen tree, she circled the area searching for more. Everything was theoretically transient. What stayed?

Follow my voice. She came to a halt and closed her eyes, absorbing the sounds around her. Mostly birds. The occasional rustle of leaves. And—

She opened her eyes and walked briskly to her right. The sound she'd heard grew louder, bubbling and trickling. There. A small creek ran through the woods, hardly noticeable. Indeed, it seemed too tiny for the streambed carved out around it.

"But I bet you grow when it rains," she murmured, uncaring that she was speaking to a stream. She looked back down at the clue, and I felt her clever mind rapidly piece it all together. The stream was permanent—but traveled. It changed size. It had a voice. It ran in deep parts, crawled when there were obstacles. And when it evaporated, it floated in the air. She frowned, still

puzzling the riddle aloud. "But you don't decay."

Lissa studied the area once more, uneasily thinking decay could apply to any plant life. Her gaze moved past a large maple tree and then jerked back. At its base grew a clump of brown and white mushrooms, several wilting and turning black. She hurried over and knelt down, and that was when she saw it: a small hole dug into the earth nearby. Leaning closer, she saw a flash of color: a purple drawstring bag.

Triumphantly, Lissa pulled it out and stood up. The bag was made of canvas and had long strings that would allow it to hang over her shoulder as she walked. She opened the bag and peered inside. There, tucked inside the fluffy and fuzzy lining, was the best thing of all: a bottle of water. Until now, Lissa hadn't realized how hot and dehydrated she'd grown—or how wearying the sun was. The candidates had been told to wear sturdy shoes and practical clothing but hadn't been allowed any other supplies. Finding this bottle was priceless.

Sitting on the log, she took a break, careful to conserve her water. While the map indicated a few more clues and "rewards," she knew she couldn't necessarily count on any more helpful bags. So, after several minutes' rest, she put away the water and slung the little tote over her shoulder. The map directed her due west, so that was the way she went.

The heat beat on her as she continued her walk, forcing her to take a few more (conservative) water breaks. She kept reminding herself it wasn't a race and that she should take it easy. After a few more clues, she discovered the map wasn't quite to scale, so it wasn't always obvious how long each leg of the hike was. Nonetheless, she was delighted to successfully solve each clue, though the rewards became more and more baffling.

One of them was a bunch of sticks sitting on a rock, something she would have sworn was a mistake, but someone civilized had clearly tied the bundle together. She added that into her bag, along with a neatly folded green plastic tarp. By now, sweat was pouring off her, and rolling up the sleeves of her button-down cotton shirt did little to help. She took more frequent breaks. Sunburn became a serious concern, so it was a huge relief when her next clue led to a bottle of sunscreen.

After a couple hours of battling the intense summer heat, Lissa became so hot and tired that she no longer had the mental energy to be annoyed about missing out on whatever was happening at Court. All that mattered was getting to the end of this test. The map showed two more clues, which she took as a promising sign. She would reach the end soon and then could simply wait for someone to get her. A flash of realization hit her. The tarp. The tarp was a sun block, she decided. She could use it at the end.

This cheered her up, as did the next prize: more water and a floppy, wide-brimmed hat that helped keep the sunlight from her face. Unfortunately, after that, what appeared to be a short leg of the trip turned out to be twice as long as she expected. By the time she finally reached the next clue, she was more interested in taking a water break than digging out whatever else the guardians had left her.

My heart went out to her. I wished so, so badly that I could help. That was my job, to protect her. She shouldn't be alone. Or should she? Was that also

part of the test? In a world where royals were almost always surrounded by guardians, this solitude had to be a total shock. Moroi were hardy and had excellent senses, but they weren't built for extreme heat and challenging terrain. I could have probably jogged the course easily. Admittedly, I wasn't sure I would have had Lissa's deductive skills in figuring out the clues.

Lissa's last reward was flint and steel, not that she had any idea what they were. I recognized them instantly as the tools of a fire-making kit but couldn't for the world figure out why she'd need to build a fire on a day like this. With a shrug, she added the items to her bag and kept going.

And that's when things started to get cold. Really cold.

She didn't entirely process it at first, mainly because the sun was still shining so brilliantly. Her brain said what she felt was impossible, but her goose bumps and chattering teeth said otherwise. She rolled her sleeves back down and quickened her pace, wishing that the sudden cold had at least come with cloud cover. Walking faster and exerting herself more helped heat her body.

Until it began to rain.

It started off as a mist, then changed to drizzle, and finally turned into a steady curtain of water. Her hair and clothing became soaked, making the cold temperature that much worse. Yet . . . the sun still shone, its light an annoyance to her sensitive skin but offering no warmth in compensation.

Magic, she realized. *This weather is magical*. It was part of the test. Somehow, Moroi air and water magic users had united to defy the hot, sunny weather. That was why she had a tarp—to block the sun *and* the rain. She considered getting it out now and wearing it like a cloak but quickly decided to wait until she reached the endpoint. She had no idea how far away that really was, though. Twenty feet? Twenty miles? The chill of the rain crept over her, seeping under her skin. It was miserable.

The cell phone in the bag was her ticket out. It was barely late afternoon. She had a long time to wait before this test ended. All she had to do was make one call . . . one call, and she'd be out of this mess and back to working on what she should be at Court. *No*. A kernel of determination flared up within her. This challenge was no longer about the Moroi throne or Tatiana's murder. It was a test she would take on for herself. She'd led a soft and sheltered life, letting others protect her. She would endure this on her own—and she would pass.

This determination took her to the map's end, a clearing ringed in trees. Two of the trees were small and close enough together that Lissa thought she might be able to drape the tarp into some sort of reasonable shelter. With cold, fumbling fingers, she managed to get it out of the bag and unfold it to its full size—which was fortunately much larger than she'd suspected. Her mood began to lift as she worked with the tarp and figured out how to create a small canopy. She crawled inside once it was complete, glad to be out of the falling rain.

But that didn't change the fact that she was wet. Or that the ground was also wet—and muddy. The tarp also didn't protect her against the cold. She felt a flash of bitterness, recalling the guardians saying magic was allowed in this test. She hadn't thought magic would be useful at the time, but now, she

could certainly see the perks of being a water user to control the rain and keep it off her. Or, better yet: being a fire user. She wished Christian was with her. She would have welcomed the warmth of both his magic and his embrace. For this kind of situation, spirit seriously sucked—unless, perhaps, she got hypothermia and needed to try to heal herself (which never worked as well as it did on other people). No, she decided. There could be no question: water and fire users had the advantage in this test.

That's when it hit her.

Fire!

Lissa straightened up from where she'd been huddled. She hadn't recognized the iron and flint for what they were, but now, vague recollections of fire-making were coming back to her. She'd never been taught those skills directly but was pretty sure striking the stones together would make a spark—if she only had dry wood. Everything out there was soaked. . . .

Except for the bundle of sticks in her bag. Laughing out loud, she untied the sticks and set them in a place shielded from the rain. After arranging them in what seemed like a campfire-friendly pattern, she tried to figure out what to do with the steel and flint. In movies, she thought she'd seen people just hit them to make sparks fly. So, that's what she did.

Nothing happened.

She tried three more times, and her earlier excitement gave way to spirit-darkened frustration. I pulled some of that from her, needing her to stay focused. On the fourth try, a spark flew off and faded away—but it was what she needed to understand the principle. Before long she could easily make sparks, but they did nothing when they landed on the wood. Up and down: her mood was a rollercoaster of hope and disappointment. *Don't give up*, I wanted to say as I drew off more negativity. *Don't give up*. I also wanted to give her a lesson on kindling, but that was pushing my limits.

Watching her, I was beginning to realize how much I underestimated Lissa's intelligence. I knew she was brilliant, but I always imagined her being helpless in these situations. She wasn't. She could reason things out. That tiny spark couldn't penetrate the wood of the sticks. She needed a bigger flame. She needed something the sparks could ignite. But what? Surely nothing in this waterlogged forest.

Her eyes fell on the map poking out of her bag. She hesitated only a moment before ripping and shredding the paper into a pile on top of the twigs. Supposedly, she'd reached the end of the hike and didn't need the map. Supposedly. But it was too late now, and Lissa pushed forward with her plan. First, she pulled out some of the bag's fluffy lining, adding the bits of fuzz to the paper. Then she took up the flint and steel again.

A spark jumped out and immediately caught a piece of the paper. It flared orange before fading out, leaving a wisp of smoke. She tried again, leaning forward to gently blow on the paper when the spark landed. A tiny flame appeared, caught a neighboring shred, and then faded. Steeling herself up, Lissa tried a final time.

"Come on, come on," she muttered, as though she might compel a fire into existence.

This time, the spark caught and held, turning into a small flame, then a

larger flame that soon consumed her kindling. I prayed it would take to the wood, or else she was out of luck. Brighter and larger the flame grew, eating the last of the paper and fuzz . . . and then spreading along the sticks. Lissa blew softly to keep it going, and before long, the campfire was in full blaze.

The fire couldn't change the piercing cold, but as far as she was concerned, she had the warmth of the entire sun in her hands. She smiled, and a sense of pride that she hadn't felt in a while spread within her. Finally able to relax, she glanced out at the rainy forest and caught the faintest flashes of color in the distance. Channeling spirit, she used her magic to intensify her ability to see auras. Sure enough—hidden far, far out among the trees, she could see two auras filled with strong, steady colors. Their owners stood still, staying quiet and covered. Lissa's smile grew. Guardians. Or maybe the air and water users controlling the weather. None of the candidates were alone out here. Ronald Ozera had had no need to worry—but then, he wouldn't know that. Only she did. Maybe spirit wasn't so useless out here after all.

The rain began to lighten, and the fire's warmth continued to soothe her. She couldn't read the time from the sky, but somehow, she knew she would have no problem waiting out the day and—

"Rose?" A voice summoned me out of Lissa's wilderness survival. "Rose, wake up or . . . whatever."

I blinked, focusing on Sydney's face, which was a few inches from mine. "What?" I demanded. "Why are you bothering me?"

She flinched and jerked away, momentarily speechless. Pulling away Lissa's darkness while joined with her hadn't affected me at the time, but now, conscious in my own body, I felt anger and irritation flood me. *It's not you, it's not Sydney*, I told myself. *It's spirit. Calm down.* I took a deep breath, refusing to let spirit master me. I was stronger than it was. I hoped.

As I fought to push those feelings down, I looked around and remembered I was in Sonya Karp's bedroom. All my problems came rushing back. There was a bound Strigoi in the other room, one we were barely keeping constrained and who didn't seem like she would give us answers anytime soon.

I looked back at Sydney, who still seemed afraid of me. "I'm sorry . . . I didn't mean to snap at you. I was just startled." She hesitated a few moments and then nodded, accepting my apology. As the fear faded from her face, I could see that something else was bothering her. "What's wrong?" I asked. As long as we were alive and Sonya was still trapped, things couldn't be *that* bad, right?

Sydney stepped back and crossed her arms. "Victor Dashkov and his brother are here."

EIGHTEEN

I SPRANG UP FROM THE bed, relieved that I didn't fall over. My head still hurt, but I no longer felt dizzy, which hopefully meant I really had evaded a concussion. Glancing at an alarm clock as I left Sonya's bedroom, I saw that I'd been in Lissa's head for a few hours. Her test had been far more extensive than I'd realized.

In the living room, I found an almost comical sight. Victor and Robert stood there, in the flesh, taking in the surrounding details. Even Robert seemed to be with us mentally this time. Only, whereas Victor was studying everything in his calculating way, Robert's attention was fixed on Sonya. His eyes bugged out in astonishment. Dimitri, meanwhile, hadn't altered his position near Sonya or put away the stake at her throat. It was clear from his stance and watchful gaze, however, that he regarded the brothers as a new threat and was trying—impossibly—to stay on guard against everything. He seemed relieved to see me and have some backup.

Sonya had gone perfectly still within her chains, which I didn't like at all. It made me think she was planning something. Her red eyes narrowed.

The whole situation was tense and dangerous, but a tiny part of me felt smug satisfaction as I studied Victor more closely. The dream meetings had been deceptive. Just as I could shift my appearance in dreams, Victor had made himself look stronger and healthier in those visits than he actually was in real life. Age, disease, and life on the run were taking their toll. Dark shadows lined his eyes, and his graying hair seemed thinner than it had a month ago. He looked haggard and tired, but I knew he was still dangerous.

"So," I said, hands on hips. "You managed to find us."

"There's one lake in this town," said Victor. "One blue house. Maybe you had trouble with those directions, but for the rest of us, it wasn't that difficult."

"Well, if you're so smart, what's your plan now?" I asked. I was trying to stall as I frantically thought about what *my* plan was. I'd wanted to capture Victor and Robert but didn't know how. Since we had to split our attention between them and Sonya, Dimitri and I couldn't team up. I wished we had leftover chain. Aside from physically subduing the brothers, we would also specifically need to restrain their hands to reduce their ability to use magic.

"Since *you're* so smart," countered Victor, "I assumed you'd have already obtained the needed information."

I gestured toward Sonya. "She's not exactly forthcoming."

Victor's eyes fell on her. "Sonya Karp. You've changed since I last saw you."

"I'm going to kill you all," Sonya snarled. "And consume you one by one. Normally, I'd start with the human and work up to the Moroi, but . . ." She glanced at Dimitri and me, her face full of rage. "I think I'll save you two for last and drag out your suffering." She paused and almost comically added, "You've annoyed me the most."

"Do all Strigoi go through some boot camp and learn all the same threats? It's a wonder you don't cackle too." I turned back to Victor. "See? Not that easy. We've tried everything. Beating it out, torturing it out. Sydney went through the names of all her relatives. No reaction."

Victor studied Sydney in detail for the first time. "So. Your pet Alchemist."

Sydney didn't move. I knew she had to be scared of facing someone who was both a vampire *and* a dangerous criminal. I had to give her points for meeting his stare unflinchingly.

"Young," Victor mused. "But of course she would be. I imagine it's the only way you could manipulate her into this little escapade."

"I'm here by choice," replied Sydney. Her expression stayed calm and confident. "No one manipulated me." Abe's blackmail wasn't really relevant at the moment.

"Look, if you wanted to keep torturing me with your not-funny comments, you could have just kept invading my dreams," I snapped. "If you don't have anything useful to offer, then get out of here and let us wait until hunger weakens Sonya." And by *get out of here*, I meant: *foolishly think you're going to leave so that I can knock your heads together and drag you back to the guardians*.

"We can help," said Victor. He touched his brother lightly on the arm. Robert flinched, jerking his eyes from Sonya to Victor. "Your methods were destined to fail. If you want answers, there's only one way to—"

Sonya made her move. Dimitri was still right next to her, but he'd also been keeping an eye on the rest of us. And of course, I'd been completely focused on the Victor drama as well. It was probably the best opening Sonya could have hoped for.

With crazy Strigoi strength, she bucked up from the chair. The chain was wrapped around her over and over, but her quick movement and strength were enough to snap the chain in two places. The rest still encircled her, but I knew perfectly well even one opening was enough for her to eventually bust out. Distracted or not, Dimitri was on her in a flash, and a second later, so was I. She was flailing in the chair, using every bit of her strength and speed to shake off the chains. If she got loose, I knew she'd put up another fierce fight. Dimitri and I met eyes briefly, and I knew we were thinking the same things. First, how were we going to re-restrain her? The chain could probably be rebound, but we'd need to unwind it and start over, which would be next to impossible. We also both knew he and I might not be able to take her down a second time, and now we had innocents around. They couldn't fight, but Sonya might be able to use them to her advantage somehow.

All we could do was try to keep her down. Holding her against a flat surface like the floor would have been much easier than the unwieldy recliner. It shook as she fought against us, and we struggled to get a good position on the chair. Dimitri had his stake—I'd set mine down earlier—and he raked it against her skin, giving us some advantage in the struggle. She screamed in

rage, and I clung to the hope we might tire her out. Probably not. We'd break first. My aching head was proof enough that I wasn't in peak condition.

I saw a flash of movement in my periphery, setting off new alarms. Robert Doru was heading toward us—and he had a silver stake in his hand. The sight was so bizarre and unexpected that I was slow to alert Dimitri. When my sluggish mind suddenly kicked back to life, it was too late.

"No!" I shrieked, seeing Robert raise the stake. "Don't kill her!"

Dimitri turned and saw Robert then, but there was nothing he could do. Dimitri and I had created the perfect opportunity. We were holding Sonya still, and with her chest vulnerable, Robert had a clean shot. Frantically, I wondered what to do. If I stopped him, I'd release Sonya. If I didn't stop him, he might kill our only chance at finding out who—

Too late. The stake plunged down with a force that astonished me. Lissa had had a very difficult time staking Dimitri, and I'd assumed the same would be true for someone like Robert, who was older and seemed so fragile. But, no. He still had to use two hands, but the stake went firmly into Sonya's chest, piercing her heart.

Sonya let out an intense scream. A brilliant, blinding white light suddenly filled the room, just as an unseen force blasted me away. I hit a wall, my brain barely registering the pain. The small house shook, and with one hand, I tried to grab something and brace myself. I squeezed my eyes shut but could still see starbursts. Time slowed. My heartbeat slowed.

Then—it all stopped. Everything. The light. The tremors. I breathed normally. All was quiet and still, as though I'd imagined what had just happened.

I blinked, trying to bring my eyes back into focus and assess the situation. I did my best to scramble clumsily to my feet and saw Dimitri was doing the same. He looked like he'd also been knocked over but had caught the wall for support, rather than smashing into it. Robert was lying flat out on the floor, and Victor rushed over to help him. Sydney just stood frozen.

And Sonya?

"Unbelievable," I whispered.

Sonya was still in the armchair, and from the way she was sitting back, it was obvious that she'd been blasted by the same force that had hit the rest of us. The chains were still around her, but she'd stopped struggling. On her lap was the silver stake Robert had held only moments ago. Sonya managed to wiggle a hand out of the chain, just enough for her fingers to brush against the stake's surface. Her eyes widened with wonder—eyes that were a rich, azure blue.

Robert had brought Sonya Karp back to life. She was no longer Strigoi.

When Lissa had saved Dimitri, I'd felt the magic's power through the bond, giving me the full and overwhelming experience of it all. Witnessing it now, without the firsthand knowledge provided from Lissa, was still just as incredible. Victor was preoccupied with Robert, but the rest of us couldn't stop staring at Sonya in amazement. I kept looking for anything—*anything*—that might give the slightest hint of her previous existence.

There was none. Her skin bore the typical Moroi paleness, but it was still filled with the warmth of life, with the faintest tinge of color—not like the

Strigoi, who were completely devoid of pigment. Her eyes were bloodshot, but that was from her rapidly forming tears. There was no red ring around her irises. And the look in those eyes . . . there was no cruelty or malice. They were not the eyes of someone who had just threatened to kill us all. Her eyes were all shock and fear and confusion. I couldn't tear my gaze from her.

A miracle. Another miracle. Even after seeing Lissa restore Dimitri, some secret part of me had believed I would never witness anything like it again. That was how miracles worked. Once in a lifetime. There'd been a lot of talk about using spirit to save Strigoi everywhere, talk that had faded when other drama—such as the murder of a queen—took precedence at Court. The shortage of spirit users had also made the idea unpopular, and besides, everyone knew the difficulties involved with a Moroi staking a Strigoi. If trained guardians died fighting Strigoi, how could a Moroi stake one? Well, here was the answer: a subdued Strigoi. A Moroi could manage staking one with two hands, especially with guardian backup. The possibilities made me reel. Robert's magic was strong, but he was old and frail. Yet, if he had still done this, could any spirit user? He'd almost made it look easy. Could Adrian do it? Could Lissa do it again?

A miracle. Sonya Karp was a living, breathing miracle.

And suddenly, she began screaming.

It started off as kind of a low wail and rapidly grew in volume. The noise snapped me to attention, but I didn't exactly know how to respond. Dimitri did. His stake fell from his hand, and he rushed to Sonya's side, where he began trying to free her from the chains. She floundered at his touch, but her efforts no longer packed the supernatural strength of an undead monster seeking revenge. These were the motions of someone desperately, terribly afraid.

I'd wrapped those chains pretty securely, but Dimitri had them off in seconds. Once Sonya was free, he sat in the chair and pulled her to him, letting her bury her face against his chest and sob. I swallowed. Dimitri had also wept when he had been changed back. An odd image of newborn babies flashed through my mind. Was crying the natural reaction for anyone being born—or, in this case, reborn—into the world?

A sudden movement grabbed my attention. Sydney's eyes were wide, and she was actually moving toward Dimitri—to stop him. "What are you doing?" she cried. "Don't release her!"

Dimitri ignored Sydney, and I caught hold of her, pulling her back. "It's okay, it's okay," I said. Sydney was the most stable factor in this whole operation. I couldn't have her freaking out. "She's not Strigoi. Look. Look at her. She's Moroi."

Sydney slowly shook her head. "She can't be. I just saw her."

"It's what happened to Dimitri. Exactly the same. You don't think he's a Strigoi, do you? You trust him." I released my hold on her, and she stayed put, her face wary.

Looking down at the brothers, I realized theirs might be a more serious situation than I had realized. Robert, while not a Strigoi, looked pale enough to be one. His eyes were vacant, drool escaping his partially open mouth. I reassessed my earlier observation about Robert making Strigoi restoration look

easy. He'd staked her like a pro, but obviously, there were a few side effects. Victor was trying to support his brother and murmured soothing and encouraging words. And on Victor's face . . . well, there was a look of compassion and fear that I'd never seen before. My brain didn't entirely know how to reconcile it with my well-defined and villainous image of him. He seemed like a real person.

Victor glanced up at me, his lips twisting into a bitter smile. "What, no witty quips now? You should be happy. We've given you what you wanted. You need answers from Sonya Karp?" He nodded toward her. "Go get them. They've certainly come at a high price."

"No!" exclaimed Dimitri. He still held Sonya against him, but his gentle expression turned hard at Victor's words. "Are you crazy? Didn't you see what just happened?"

Victor arched an eyebrow. "Yes. I noticed."

"She's in no condition to answer anything! She's in shock. Leave her alone."

"Don't act like *she's* the one who's suffering here," snapped Victor. Turning back to Robert, Victor helped his brother stand and go toward the couch. Robert barely managed it, his legs trembling and then giving way as he sat down. Victor put an arm around Robert. "You'll be all right. Everything's all right."

"Will he be?" I asked uncertainly. Robert didn't look like he was in all that good of shape. My earlier thoughts about spirit users saving Strigoi continued growing unrealistic. "He . . . he did it before and recovered, right? And Lissa's fine."

"Robert was much younger—as is Vasilisa," replied Victor, patting Robert's shoulder. "And this is hardly a simple spell. Doing it even once is monumental. Twice? Well, you and I both know how spirit works, and this feat takes a toll on both body and mind. Robert has made a great sacrifice for you."

He had, I supposed. "Thank you, Robert," I said. The words came hesitantly to my lips. Robert didn't seem to hear.

Dimitri stood up, lifting Sonya easily in his arms. She was still crying, but her sobs were quieter now.

"She needs to rest," he said gruffly. "Believe me, you have no idea what's going on inside her right now."

"Oh, I believe you," I said.

"You're idiots," snapped Victor. "Both of you."

It was a wonder Dimitri's glare didn't pin Victor to the floor. "No interrogation yet."

I nodded my agreement, not knowing what else to do. When Lissa had changed Dimitri, she'd taken on a fierce, similarly protective attitude. He might not have been the one to change Sonya, but he was the only one here who had any idea what she was going through. I knew he'd had a hard adjustment and that the initial effects of the restoration had been disorienting. That wasn't even taking into account the subsequent depression.

He swept past all of us, taking Sonya to her bedroom. Sydney watched them go and then glanced over to the sofa, where Victor still had his arm wrapped around his brother. The Alchemist met my eyes wonderingly.

"I heard . . . but I didn't believe."

"Sometimes," I told her, "I still don't. It goes against every rule of the universe."

To my surprise, she touched the small gold cross around her neck. "Some rules are bigger than the universe."

Victor rose from the couch, apparently satisfied Robert was resting. I tensed up. Miracles aside, he was still a criminal, one I intended to capture. He took a step toward me, pitching his voice low.

"Sorry to interrupt Metaphysics 101, but you need to listen to me," he said. "Be careful, Rose. Very careful. A lot rests on you now. Don't let your pet wolf keep you from finding out what Sonya knows."

"But he's right," I exclaimed. "It's been five minutes! What she went through . . . what they both went through . . . well, it's kind of a big deal. Literally life-changing. He had to recover too and adjust to being saved. Once she does, she'll help us."

"Are you sure?" he asked, narrowing his eyes. "Will *she* think she's been saved? You forget: Belikov was turned against his will. She wasn't."

"W-what are you saying? That she's going to try to become Strigoi again?"

He shrugged. "I'm saying get your answers soon. And don't leave her alone."

With that, Victor turned and headed toward the kitchen. He soon returned with a glass of water. Robert drank it greedily and then fell into a heavy sleep. I sighed and leaned against a wall near Sydney, totally worn out. I still hurt from the earlier fight.

"What now?" asked Sydney.

I shook my head. "I don't know. We wait, I guess."

Dimitri returned a little while later and spared a small glance for Robert. "She's sleeping too," he told me. "The transformation . . . it's difficult." I could see a haunted look in his eyes and wondered what memory was tormenting him now. The memory of being changed? The memory of being Strigoi?

"I don't think we should leave Sonya alone," I said. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Victor smirk. "Someone should stay with her in case she wakes up. She won't know what's going on."

Dimitri didn't answer for a few seconds as he scrutinized me. He knew me well enough to sense there might be something else on my mind. Fortunately, he couldn't find a fault in my logic.

"You're right. Do you mind sitting with her?" he asked Sydney.

I groped for something to say. No, no. Not Sydney. If Sonya did turn on us, we needed someone else on guard—someone who could fight back. Sydney, probably guessing my problem, saved me from lying to Dimitri—or from telling him the truth about my concerns.

"She doesn't know me. It might make things worse when she wakes up. Besides . . ." Sydney put on that disgusted expression that Alchemists excelled at. "I don't really feel that comfortable with someone who was a monster five minutes ago."

"She's not Strigoi," he exclaimed. "She's absolutely, completely Moroi again!" Even I felt a little cowed by the harshness of his voice, but I wasn't entirely surprised at his vehement reaction. He'd had a hard time convincing others he'd changed. His face softened a little. "I know it's hard to believe, but she really has changed."

"I'll stay with her then," I said.

"No, no." Dimitri shook his head. "Sydney's right about one thing: Sonya might be confused. It's better if someone's there who understands what's happened."

I started to argue that I was the only one Sonya really knew but then decided I'd rather stay with the brothers. They seemed harmless now, but I didn't trust them. Dimitri apparently didn't either. He took a few steps forward and leaned down, speaking only an inch from my ear.

"Keep an eye on them," he murmured. "Robert's down right now but might recover sooner than we think."

"I know."

He started to turn, then glanced back at me. His commander face had softened into something thoughtful and awestruck. "Rose?"

"Yeah?"

"That . . . was that what it was like when Lissa changed me?"

"More or less."

"I didn't realize . . . it was . . ." He struggled for words. It was uncharacteristic. "The way that light filled the room, the way she changed. Seeing that life emerge from death . . . it was . . ."

"Beautiful?"

He nodded. "Life like that . . . you don't—no, you *can't* waste it."

"No," I agreed. "You can't."

I saw something shift in him then. It was small, just like in the alley, but I knew then another piece of the Strigoi-trauma had peeled away.

He said no more, and I watched as he walked back down the hall. With nothing else to do, Sydney sat down cross-legged on the floor, holding a book in her lap. It was closed, her thoughts clearly elsewhere. Meanwhile, Victor sat back in the armchair and reclined it. He didn't look as bad as Robert, but lines of fatigue showed on both brothers. Good. The longer they were out of commission, the better. I brought in a chair from the kitchen so I could sit and survey the room. Everything was peaceful.

I felt like a babysitter, which I suppose I kind of was. It had been a long day, and night soon turned the windows black. This made worried me. For all I knew, Sonya had some Strigoi pals who might stop by. The fact that Donovan knew her certainly indicated she wasn't a total outcast among them. It made me extra-vigilant, but at the same time, I was exhausted. The brothers were already asleep. Sydney, perhaps in an attempt to keep her human schedule, eventually found a spare blanket and pillow and curled up in a makeshift bed on the floor.

And me? I was halfway between human and vampiric schedules. I had a feeling Dimitri was the same. Really, we were on a do-what's-necessary schedule, in which extensive sleep was not an option.

A hum of excitement and astonishment suddenly sang through the bond. I sensed no danger or threat, but curiosity made me decide to check in with Lissa anyway. Even if I was in her mind, I knew my body would stay watchful, and I wanted to know how the rest of Lissa's test had gone.

Beautifully, of course. She rode back to Court, exhausted but proud of herself. She wasn't the only one. The rest of her companions all wore similar

expressions . . . all except for Ava Drozdov. She had been the only one to break and use the cell phone to call for help. Lissa was surprised that Ava had cracked. After his earlier bitching, Marcus Lazar had seemed the most likely to bail. But no, the old man had managed it somehow, meaning he'd continue on in the monarch trials. Ava refused to make eye contact with anyone, instead staring bleakly out the window as they traveled back to Court. She would still hold a Council spot, but her shot at being queen was gone.

Lissa felt bad for her but couldn't spare too much concern. It was the way of the trials, the way they determined the best candidates. Besides, Lissa had her own issues. Staying out in the daytime had run contrary to the normal vampiric schedule. Now, she simply wanted to get back to Court, find her room, and sleep for a few hours. She wanted some peace.

Instead, she found a mob waiting for her.

NINETEEN

THE VANS PARKED IN A semi-remote part of Court, so seeing the area packed with eager Moroi was quite a shock to Lissa. Guardians moved through the people like ghosts, just as they had at the nomination session, keeping as much order as possible. The crowd kept getting in the way as the vans attempted to reach the garages, and faces looked in the windows, trying to get a glimpse of the royal candidates.

Lissa stared at the masses in shock, almost afraid to get out. Ariana gave her a comforting smile. "This is normal. They all want to know who made it and who didn't. *They* especially want to know." She inclined her head toward the front of the van. Peering through the windshield, Lissa spied the other six candidates. Because the forest course could only accommodate so many people, the group had been split in half. The rest of the candidates would take the same test tomorrow and were no doubt curious who among their competitors had passed today.

Lissa was used to order and decorum around royals, so she was astonished to see such eagerness and frenzy among them now. And of course, the "common" Moroi who'd been arriving at Court were mixed into the crowd too. Everyone was pushing, peering over the heads of others to find out what had happened. People were shouting some of the candidates' names, and I was half-surprised they hadn't come up with songs and banners.

Lissa and her companions exited the van and were met with a wave of cheers that rippled through the crowd. It became obvious pretty quickly who had passed and who hadn't. This sent the crowd abuzz even more. Lissa stood rooted to the spot, staring around and feeling lost. It was one thing to rationally discuss the pros of her running for queen with her friends. It was an entirely different matter to suddenly be thrust into what the elections truly meant.

Her focus had been limited to a few things: my safety, finding the murderer, and surviving the tests. Now, as she took in the crowd, she realized the election was bigger than her, bigger than anything she could have imagined. For these people, it wasn't a joke. It wasn't a scam to twist the law and stall for time. Their lives were figuratively on the line. Moroi and dhampirs lived inside various countries and obeyed those laws, but they also obeyed *this* government, the one that operated out of the Court. It reached around the world and affected every dhampir and Moroi who chose to stay in our society. We had some voting, yes, but the king or queen shaped our futures.

The guardians in charge of the crowds finally gave the okay for family members to push through the masses and collect their nominees. Lissa had no one. Both Janine and Eddie—despite earlier claims—were occasionally given temporary tasks that prevented them from being with Lissa 24/7, and she certainly had no family to come for her. Adrift, she felt dizzy in the chaos, still stunned by her moment of clarity. Conflicting emotions warred within her. Deceiving everyone made her feel unworthy, like she should resign her candidacy right now. At the same time, she suddenly wanted to be worthy of the elections. She wanted to hold her head high and walk into the tests proudly, even if she was taking them for ulterior motives.

A strong hand at last caught hold of her arm. Christian. "Come on. Let's get out of here." He pulled her away, shouldering through the onlookers. "Hey," he called to a couple guardians on the crowd's periphery. "A little help here for the princess?"

It was the first time I had ever seen him act like a royal, throwing around the authority of his bloodline. To me, he was snarky, cynical Christian. In Moroi society, at eighteen, he could now technically be addressed as Lord Ozera. I'd forgotten that. The two guardians hadn't. They rushed to Lissa's side, helping Christian part the crowd. The faces around her were a blur, the noise a dull roar. Yet, every once in a while, something would come through to her. The chanting of her name. Declarations about the return of the dragon, which was the symbol of the Dragomir family. *This is real*, she kept thinking. *This is real.*

The guardians efficiently led her out of it all and back across the Court's grounds to her building. They released her once they considered her safe, and she graciously thanked them for their help. When she and Christian were in her room, she sank onto the bed, stunned.

"Oh my God," she said. "That was insane."

Christian smiled. "Which part? Your welcome home party? Or the test itself? You look like you just . . . well, I'm not really sure *what* you just did."

Lissa took a quick survey of herself. They'd given her dry towels on the ride home, but her clothing was still damp and was wrinkling as it dried. Her shoes and jeans had mud all over them, and she didn't even want to think about what her hair looked like.

"Yeah, we—"

The words stuck on her tongue—and not because she suddenly decided not to tell him.

"I can't say," she murmured. "It really worked. The spell won't let me."

"What spell?" he asked.

Lissa rolled up her sleeve and lifted the bandage to show him the tiny tattooed dot on her arm. "It's a compulsion spell so I won't talk about the test. Like the Alchemists have."

"Wow," he said, truly impressed. "I never actually thought those worked."

"I guess so. It's really weird. I want to talk about it, but I just . . . can't."

"It's okay," he said, brushing some of her damp hair aside. "You passed. That's what matters. Just focus on that."

"The only thing I want to focus on right now is a shower—which is kind of ironic, considering how soaked I am." She didn't move, though, and instead

stared off at the far wall.

"Hey," said Christian gently. "What's wrong? Did the crowd scare you?"

She turned back to him. "No, that's the thing. I mean, they were intimidating, yeah. But I just realized . . . I don't know. I realized I'm part of a major process, one that's gone on since—"

"The beginning of time?" teased Christian, quoting Nathan's nonsensical statement.

"Nearly," she answered, with a small smile that soon faded. "This goes beyond tradition, Christian. The elections are a core part of our society. Ingrained. We can talk about changing age laws or fighting or whatever, but this is ancient. And far-reaching. Those people out there? They're not all Americans. They've come from other countries. I forget sometimes that even though the Court is here, it rules Moroi everywhere. What happens here affects the whole world."

"Where are you going with this?" he asked. She was lost in her own thoughts and couldn't see Christian as objectively as I could. He knew Lissa. He understood her and loved her. The two of them had a synchronicity similar to what Dimitri and I shared. Sometimes, however, Lissa's thoughts spun in directions he couldn't guess. He'd never admit it, but I knew part of why he loved her was that—unlike me, who everyone knew was impetuous—Lissa always seemed the picture of calmness and rationality. Then, she'd do something totally unexpected. Those moments delighted him—but sometimes scared him because he never knew just how much a role spirit was playing in her actions. Now was one of those times. He knew the elections were stressing her, and like me, he knew that could bring out the worst.

"I'm going to take these tests seriously," she said. "It's—it's shameful not to. An insult to our society. My ultimate goal is to find out who framed Rose, but in the meantime? I'm going to go through the trials like someone who intends to be queen."

Christian hesitated before speaking, a rarity for him. "Do you *want* to be queen?"

That snapped Lissa from her dreamy philosophizing about tradition and honor. "No! Of course not. I'm eighteen. I can't even drink yet."

"That's never stopped you from doing it," he pointed out, becoming more like his usual self.

"I'm serious! I want to go to college. I want Rose back. I *don't* want to rule the Moroi nation."

A sly look lit Christian's blue eyes. "You know, Aunt Tasha makes jokes about how you'd actually be a better queen than the others, except sometimes . . . I don't think she's joking."

Lissa groaned and stretched back on the bed. "I love her, but we've got to keep her in check. If anyone could actually get that law changed, it would be her and her activist friends."

"Well, don't worry. The thing about her ‘activist friends' is that they have so much to protest, they don't usually get behind one thing at the same time." Christian stretched out beside her and pulled her close. "But for what it's worth, I think you'd be a great queen too, Princess Dragomir."

"You're going to get dirty," she warned.

"Already am. Oh, you mean from your clothes?" He wrapped his arms around her, heedless of her damp and muddy state. "I spent most of my childhood hiding in a dusty attic and own exactly one dress shirt. You really think I care about this T-shirt?"

She laughed and then kissed him, letting her mind free itself of worry for a moment and just savor the feel of his lips. Considering they were on a bed, I wondered if it was time for me to go. After several seconds, she pulled back and sighed contentedly.

"You know, sometimes I think I love you."

"Sometimes?" he asked in mock outrage.

She ruffled his hair. "All the time. But I've got to keep you on your toes."

"Consider me kept."

He brought his lips toward hers again but stopped when a knock sounded at the door. Lissa pulled back from the near-kiss, but neither of them broke from the embrace.

"Don't answer," said Christian.

Lissa frowned, peering toward the living room. She slipped out of his arms, stood up, and walked toward the door. When she was several feet from it, she nodded knowingly. "It's Adrian."

"More reason not to answer," said Christian.

Lissa ignored him and opened the door, and sure enough, my devil-may-care boyfriend stood there. From behind Lissa, I heard Christian say, "Worst. Timing. Ever."

Adrian studied Lissa and then looked at Christian sprawling on the bed on the far side of the suite. "Huh," Adrian said, letting himself in. "So that's how you're going to fix the family problem. Little Dragomirs. Good idea."

Christian sat up and strolled toward them. "Yeah, that's exactly it. You're interrupting official Council business."

Adrian was dressed casually for him, jeans and a black T-shirt, though he made it look like designer clothing. Actually, it probably was. God, I missed him. I missed them all.

"What's going on?" asked Lissa. While Christian seemed to consider Adrian's arrival a personal offense, Lissa knew that Adrian wouldn't be here without a good reason—especially this early in the Moroi day. Although he had on his normal lazy smile, there was an excited and eager glitter in his aura. He had news.

"I've got him," said Adrian. "Got him trapped."

"Who?" asked Lissa, startled.

"That idiot Blake Lazar."

"What do you mean trapped?" asked Christian, as perplexed as Lissa. "Did you set out a bear trap on the tennis courts or something?"

"I wish. He's over at the Burning Arrow. I just bought another round, so he should still be there if we hurry. He thinks I went out for a cigarette."

Judging from the scent wreathing Adrian, Lissa had a feeling he actually had been out for a cigarette. And likely shared in the round. "You've been at a bar this early?"

Adrian shrugged. "It's not early for humans."

"But you're not—"

"Come *on*, cousin." Adrian's aura didn't have the muted colors of someone who was completely drunk, but yes, he'd definitely had a few drinks. "If pretty boy Ambrose was right about Aunt Tatiana, then this guy can tell us the names of other jealous women."

"Why didn't you ask him yourself?" asked Christian.

"Because me asking about my aunt's sex life would be sick and wrong," said Adrian. "Whereas Blake will be more than happy to talk to our charming princess here."

Lissa really wanted her bed, but finding out anything to help me sparked a new rush of energy within her. "Okay, let me at least get some different clothes and brush my hair."

While she was changing in the bathroom, she heard Adrian say to Christian, "You know, your shirt's kind of grungy-looking. Seems like you could put in a little more effort since you're dating a princess."

Fifteen minutes or so later, the threesome were on their way across Court to a tucked away bar inside an administrative building. I'd been there before and had originally thought it was a weird place to house a bar. But, after a recent stint of filing, I'd decided that if I were doing office work for living, I'd probably want a quick source of alcohol on hand, too.

The bar was dimly lit, both for mood and Moroi comfort. Adrian's joking aside, it really was early for Moroi, and only a couple patrons were there. Adrian made a small gesture to the bartender, which I presumed was some kind of ordering signal because the woman immediately turned and began pouring a drink.

"Hey, Ivashkov! Where'd you go?"

A voice called over to Lissa and the others, and after a few moments, she spotted a lone guy sitting at a corner table. As Adrian led them closer, Lissa saw that the guy was young—about Adrian's age, with curly black hair and brilliant teal eyes, kind of like Abe's recent tie. It was as though someone had taken the stunning color of both Adrian and Christian's eyes and mixed them together. He had a leanly muscled body—about as buff as any Moroi could manage—and, even with a boyfriend, Lissa could admire how hot he was.

"To get better-looking company," replied Adrian, pulling out a chair.

The Moroi then noticed Adrian's companions and jumped up. He caught hold of Lissa's hand, leaned over, and kissed it. "Princess Dragomir. It's an honor to meet you at last. Seeing you from a distance was beautiful. Up close? Divine."

"This," said Adrian grandly, "is Blake Lazar."

"It's nice to meet you," she said.

Blake smiled radiantly. "May I call you Vasilisa?"

"You can call me Lissa."

"You can also," added Christian, "let go of her hand now."

Blake looked over at Christian, taking a few more moments to release Lissa's hand—seeming very proud about those extra seconds. "I've seen you too. Ozera. Crispin, right?"

"Christian," corrected Lissa.

"Right." Blake pulled out a chair, still playing the over-the-top gentleman. "Please. Join us." He made no such offer to Christian, who went out of his way

to sit close to Lissa. "What would you like to drink? It's on me."

"Nothing," said Lissa.

The bartender appeared just then, bringing Adrian's drink and another for Blake. "Never too early. Ask Ivashkov. You drink as soon as you roll out of bed, right?"

"There's a bottle of scotch right on my nightstand," said Adrian, still keeping his tone light. Lissa opened her eyes to his aura. It bore the bright gold all spirit users had, still muddled slightly from alcohol. It also had the faintest tinge of red—not true anger, but definite annoyance. Lissa recalled that neither Adrian nor Ambrose had had a good opinion of this Blake guy.

"So what brings you and Christopher here?" asked Blake. He finished a glass of something amber colored and set it down beside the new drink.

"*Christian*," said Christian.

"We were talking about my aunt earlier," said Adrian. Again, he managed to sound very conversational, but no matter how much he might want to clear my name, delving into the details of Tatiana's murder obviously bothered him.

Blake's smile diminished a little. "How depressing. For both of you." That was directed to Adrian and Lissa. Christian might as well have not existed. "Sorry about Hathaway too," he added to Lissa alone. "I've heard how upset you've been. Who'd have seen that coming?"

Lissa realized he was referring to how she'd been pretending to be angry and hurt by me. "Well," she said bitterly. "I guess you just don't know people. There were a million clues beforehand. I just didn't pay attention."

"You must be upset too," said Christian. "We heard you and the queen were kind of close."

Blake's grin returned. "Yeah . . . we knew each other pretty well. I'm going to miss her. She might have seemed cold to some people, but believe me, she knew how to have a good time." Blake glanced at Adrian. "You must have known that."

"Not in the way you did." Adrian paused to take a sip of his own drink. I think he needed it to restrain any snippy remarks, and honestly, I didn't begrudge him it. I actually admired his self-control. If I'd been in his place, I would have long since punched Blake. "Or Ambrose."

Blake's pretty smile transformed into a full-fledged scowl. "Him? That blood whore? He didn't deserve to be in her presence. I can't even believe they let him stay at Court."

"He actually thinks *you* killed the queen." Lissa then added hastily, "Which is ridiculous when all the evidence proves Rose did it." Those hadn't been Ambrose's exact words, but she wanted to see if she could elicit a reaction. She did.

"He thinks *what*?" Yes. Definitely no smile now. Without it, Blake suddenly didn't seem as good-looking as earlier. "That lying bastard! I have an alibi, and he knows it. He's just pissed off because she liked me better."

"Then why'd she keep him around?" asked Christian, face almost angelic. "Weren't you enough?"

Blake fixed him with a glare while finishing the new drink in nearly one gulp. Almost by magic, the bartender appeared with another. Blake nodded his thanks before continuing. "Oh, I was more than enough. More than enough for

a dozen women, but *I* didn't fool around on the side like he did."

Adrian's expression was growing increasingly pained at each mention of Tatiana's sex life. Still, he played his role. "I suppose you're talking about Ambrose's other girl-friends? "

"Yup. But 'girl' is kind of extreme. They were all older, and honestly, I think they paid him. Not that your mom needed to pay anyone," added Blake. "I mean, she's actually pretty hot. But you know, she couldn't really be with him in any real way."

It seemed to take all of them a moment to follow what Blake was alluding to. Adrian caught on first. "*What* did you just say?"

"Oh." Blake looked legitimately surprised, but it was hard to say if it was an act. "I thought you knew. Your mom and Ambrose . . . well, who could blame her? With your dad? Though just between you and me, I think she could have done better." Blake's tone implied exactly whom he thought Daniella could have done better with.

In Lissa's vision, Adrian's aura flared red. "You son of a bitch!" Adrian was not the fighting type, but there was a first time for everything—and Blake had just crossed a serious line. "My mom was *not* cheating on my dad. And even if she was . . . she sure as hell wouldn't have to pay for it."

Blake didn't seem fazed, but maybe things would have been different if Adrian actually had hit him. Lissa rested her hand on Adrian's arm and squeezed it gently. "Easy," she murmured. I felt the smallest tingle of calming compulsion move from her into him. Adrian recognized it immediately and pulled his arm back, giving her a look that said he didn't appreciate her "help."

"I thought you didn't like your dad," said Blake, utterly clueless that his news *might* be upsetting. "And besides, don't get all pissy at me. *I* wasn't sleeping with her. I'm just telling you what I heard. Like I said, if you want to start accusing random people, go after someone like Ambrose."

Lissa jumped in to keep Adrian from saying anything. "How many women? Do you know who else he was involved with?"

"Three others." Blake ticked off names on his hand. "Marta Drozdov and Mirabel Conta. Wait. That's two. I was thinking with Daniella; that's three. But then, that's four with the queen. Yeah, four."

Lissa didn't concern herself with Blake's faulty math skills, though it did support Adrian's previous "idiot" claims. Marta Drozdov was a semi-notorious royal who had taken to traveling the world in her old age. By Lissa's estimation, Marta was hardly in the U.S. most of the year, let alone Court. She didn't seem invested enough to murder Tatiana. As for Mirabel Conta . . . she was notorious in a different way. She was known for sleeping with half the guys at Court, married or otherwise. Lissa didn't know her well, but Mirabel had never seemed overly interested in any one guy.

"Sleeping with other women wouldn't really give him a motive for killing the queen," pointed out Lissa.

"No," agreed Blake. "Like I said, it's obvious that Hathaway girl did it." He paused. "Damned shame too. She's pretty hot. God, that body. Anyway, if Ambrose had killed her, he'd have done it because he was jealous of me, because Tatiana liked me better. Not because of all those other women he was doing."

"Why wouldn't Ambrose just kill you?" asked Christian. "Makes more sense."

Blake didn't have a chance to respond because Adrian was still back on the earlier topic, his eyes flashing with anger. "My mother wasn't sleeping with anybody. She doesn't even sleep with my father."

Blake continued in his oblivious way. "Hey, I saw them. They were all over each other. Did I mention how hot your—"

"Stop it," warned Lissa. "It's not helping."

Adrian clenched his glass. "None of this is helping!" Clearly, things weren't going the way he'd hoped when he'd first summoned Lissa and Christian from her room. "And I'm not going to sit and listen to this bullshit." Adrian downed the drink and shot up from his chair, turning abruptly for the exit. He tossed some cash on the bar before walking out the door.

"Poor guy," said Blake. He was back to his calm, arrogant self. "He's been through a lot between his aunt, mom, and murdering girlfriend. That's why really, at the end of the day, you just can't trust women." He winked at Lissa. "Present company excluded, of course."

Lissa felt as disgusted as Adrian, and a quick glance at Christian's stormy face showed he felt the same. It was time to go before someone really did punch Blake. "Well, it's been great talking to you, but we need to go."

Blake gave her puppy-dog eyes. "But you just got here! I was hoping we could get to know each other." It went without saying what he meant by that. "Oh. And Kreskin too."

Christian didn't even bother with a correction this time. He simply took hold of Lissa's hand. "We have to go."

"Yeah," agreed Lissa.

Blake shrugged and waved for another drink. "Well, any time you want to really experience the world, come find me."

Christian and Lissa headed for the door, with Christian muttering, "I really hope that last part was meant for you, not me."

"That's no world I want to experience," said Lissa with a grimace. They stepped outside, and she glanced around, in case Adrian had lingered. Nope. He was gone, and she didn't blame him. "I can see now why Ambrose and Adrian don't like him. He's such a . . ."

"Asshole?" supplied Christian. They turned toward her building.

"I suppose so."

"Enough to commit murder?"

"Honestly? No." Lissa sighed. "I kind of agree with Ambrose . . . I don't think Blake's smart enough for murder. Or that the motive's really there. I can't tell if people are lying or not from their auras, but his didn't reveal anything overly dishonest. You joked, but if anyone was going to commit a jealous murder, why wouldn't the guys want to kill each other? A lot easier."

"They did both have easy access to Tatiana," Christian reminded her.

"I know. But if there *is* love and sex involved here . . . it seems like it'd be someone jealous of the queen. A woman."

A long, meaningful pause hung between them, neither of them wanting to say what they were both likely thinking. Finally, Christian broke the silence.

"Say, like, Daniella Ivashkov?"

Lissa shook her head. "I can't believe that. She doesn't seem like the type."

"Murderers never seem like the type. That's why they get away with it."

"Have you been studying up on your criminology or something? "

"No." They reached her building's front door, and he opened it for Lissa. "Just laying out some facts. We know Adrian's mom never liked Tatiana for personality reasons. Now we find out that they were sharing the same guy."

"She has an alibi," said Lissa stonily.

"Everyone has an alibi," he reminded her. "And as we've learned, those can be paid for. In fact, Daniella's already paid for one."

"I still can't believe it. Not without more proof. Ambrose swore this was more political than personal."

"Ambrose isn't off the list either."

They came to Lissa's room. "This is harder than I thought it would be." They went inside, and Christian wrapped his arms around her.

"I know. But we'll do it together. We'll figure it out. But . . . we might want to keep some of this to ourselves. Maybe I'm overreacting here, but I think it'd be best if we don't ever, ever tell Adrian his mom has an excellent motive for having killed his aunt."

"Oh, you think?" She rested her head against his chest and yawned.

"Naptime," said Christian, leading her toward the bed.

"I still need a shower."

"Sleep first. Shower later." He pulled back the covers. "I'll sleep with you."

"Sleep or *sleep*?" she asked dryly, sliding gratefully into bed.

"Real sleep. You need it." He crawled in beside her, spooning against her and resting his face on her shoulder. "Of course, afterward, if you want to conduct any official Council business . . ."

"I swear, if you say 'Little Dragomirs,' you can sleep in the hall."

I'm sure there was a patented Christian retort coming, but another knock cut him off. He looked up in exasperation. "Don't answer it. For real this time."

But Lissa couldn't help herself. She broke from his embrace and climbed out of bed. "It's not Adrian . . ."

"Then it's probably not important," said Christian.

"We don't know that."She got up and opened the door, revealing—my mother.

Janine Hathaway swept into the room as casually as Adrian had, her eyes sharp as she studied every detail around her for a threat. "Sorry I was away," she told Lissa. "Eddie and I wanted to set up an alternating system, but we both got pulled for duty earlier." She glanced over at the rumpled bed, with Christian in it, but being who she was, she came to a pragmatic conclusion, not a romantic one. "Just in time. I figured you'd want to sleep after the test. Don't worry—I'll keep watch and make sure nothing happens."

Christian and Lissa exchanged rueful looks.

"Thanks," said Lissa.

TWENTY

"YOU SHOULD SLEEP."

Sydney's soft voice nearly made me leap out of my skin, proving that even while in Lissa's mind, I could still stay alert. I tuned back to Sonya's dark living room. Aside from Sydney, everything was quiet and at peace.

"You look like the walking dead," she continued. "And I don't say that lightly."

"I've got to stay on watch," I said.

"I'll watch. You sleep."

"You're not trained like me," I pointed out. "You might miss something."

"Even I wouldn't miss Strigoi beating down the door," she replied. "Look, I know you guys are tough. You don't have to convince me. But I have a feeling things are going to get harder, and I don't want you passing out at some crucial moment. If you sleep now, you can relieve Dimitri later."

Only the mention of Dimitri made me give in. We *would* need to relieve each other eventually. So, reluctantly, I crawled into Sydney's bed on the floor, giving her all sorts of instructions that I think she rolled her eyes at. I fell asleep almost instantly and then woke up just as quickly when I heard the sound of a door closing.

I immediately sat upright, expecting to see Strigoi busting down the door. Instead, I found sunlight creeping in through the windows and Sydney watching me with amusement. In the living room, Robert was sitting up on the couch, rubbing his eyes. Victor was gone. I turned to Sydney in alarm.

"He's in the bathroom," she said, anticipating my question.

That was the sound I'd heard. I exhaled in relief and stood up, surprised at how even a few hours of sleep had energized me. If I only had food, I'd be ready for anything. Sonya didn't have any, of course, but I settled for a glass of water in the kitchen. As I stood there drinking, I noticed that the Dashkov brothers had made themselves at home: coats hanging on hooks, car keys on the counter. I quietly grabbed hold of the keys and called for Sydney.

She came in, and I slipped her the keys, trying not to let them rattle.

"Do you still know about cars?" I murmured.

In one exquisite look, she told me that was a ridiculous and insulting question.

"Okay. Can you go do a grocery run? We're going to need food. And maybe on your way out, you can, um, make sure their car has engine trouble or something? Anything that keeps it here. But not something obvious, like

slashed tires."

She put the keys in her pocket. "Easy. Got any food requests?"

I thought about it. "Something with sugar. And coffee for Dimitri."

"Coffee's a given," she said.

Victor stepped into the kitchen, his typically unconcerned expression making me think he hadn't heard me instructing Sydney to sabotage his car. "Sydney's getting groceries," I said, hoping to distract him before he might notice the missing keys. "Need anything?"

"A feeder would be nice, but barring that, Robert has an especial liking for Cheerios. The apple cinnamon kind." He smiled at Sydney. "I never thought I'd see the day an Alchemist would be an errand girl. It's charming."

Sydney opened her mouth, no doubt to make some biting comment, and I quickly shook my head. "Just go," I said.

She went, and Victor soon returned to Robert's side. Convinced the brothers wouldn't be going anywhere in full daylight without a car, I decided it was time to check on Dimitri. To my surprise, Sonya was awake. She sat cross-legged on the bed with him, and the two spoke in hushed tones. Her hair was disheveled from both sleep and fighting, but otherwise, she showed no cuts or bruises from the battle. Dimitri had been the same after his transformation, escaping terrible burns. The power of a Strigoi restoration healed all injuries. Between my skinned legs and pseudo-concussion, I kind of wished someone had transformed me from a Strigoi.

Sonya turned from Dimitri as I entered. A sequence of emotions passed across her face. Fear. Astonishment. Recognition.

"Rose?" There was hesitancy in the word, like she wondered if I was a hallucination.

I forced a smile. "It's good to see you again." I chose not to add, "Now that you're not trying to suck the life out of me."

She averted her eyes down to her hands, studying her fingers like they were magical and wonderful. Of course, after being a monster, maybe having her "old hands" back really was wondrous. The day after his change, Dimitri hadn't seemed quite so fragile, but he'd certainly been in shock. That was also when he'd grown depressed. Was she? Or did she want to turn again, as Victor had suggested?

I didn't know what to say. It was all so strange and awkward. "Sydney went for groceries," I told Dimitri lamely. "She also stayed up so that I could sleep last night."

"I know," he said with a small smile. "I got up once to check on you."

I felt myself flushing, somehow embarrassed that I'd been caught in weakness. "You can rest too," I told him. "Get some breakfast, and then I'll keep an eye on everything. I have it on good authority that Victor's going to have car trouble. Also that Robert really likes Cheerios, so if you want some, you're out of luck. He doesn't seem like the sharing type."

Dimitri's smile grew. Sonya suddenly lifted her head.

"There's another spirit user here," she said, voice frantic. "I can feel it. I remember him." She looked between Dimitri and me. "It's not safe. We're not safe. You shouldn't have us around."

"Everything's fine," said Dimitri, voice so, so gentle. That tone was rare for

him, but I'd heard it before. He'd used it on me in some of my most desperate moments. "Don't worry."

Sonya shook her head. "No. You don't understand. We . . . we're capable of terrible things. To ourselves, to others. It's why I changed, to stop the madness. And it did, except . . . it was worse. In its way. The things I did . . ."

There it was, the same remorse Dimitri had felt. Half-afraid he'd start telling her there was no redemption for her either, I said, "It wasn't you. You were controlled by something else."

She buried her face in her hands. "But I chose it. *Me*. I made it happen."

"That was spirit," I said. "It's hard to fight. Like you said, it can make you do terrible things. You weren't thinking clearly. Lissa battles with the same thing all the time."

"Vasilisa?" Sonya lifted her eyes and stared off into space. I think she was digging through memories. In fact, despite her ramblings now, I didn't believe she was quite as unstable as she'd been just before becoming Strigoi. We'd heard healings could lessen spirit's madness, and I think Robert's transformation had lightened some of the darkness within her for now. "Yes, of course. Vasilisa has it too." She turned to me in a panic. "Did you help her? Did you get her out of there?"

"I did," I said, trying to emulate Dimitri's gentleness. Lissa and I fled St. Vladimir's for a while, partly because of warnings from Sonya. "We left and then came back and, uh, were able to stop what was hunting her." I didn't think it was a good idea for Sonya to know that the thing—or rather, person—hunting Lissa was now sitting out in the living room. I took a step forward. "And you can help Lissa too. We need to know if—"

"No," said Dimitri. No gentleness now in the warning look he gave me. "Not yet."

"But—"

"*Not yet.*"

I shot him a glare in return but said no more. I was all for giving Sonya her recuperation time, but we didn't have forever. The clock was ticking, and we had to find out what Sonya knew. I felt like Dimitri would have been able to give us this information immediately after he'd been changed back. Of course, he hadn't been unstable beforehand, so he'd kind of had an edge. Still. We couldn't play house in Kentucky forever.

"Can I see my flowers?" asked Sonya. "Can I go outside and see my flowers?"

Dimitri and I exchanged glances. "Of course," he said.

We all moved toward the door, and that's when I had to ask. "Why did you grow flowers when you were . . . like you were?"

She paused. "I've always grown flowers."

"I know. I remember. They were gorgeous. The ones here are gorgeous too. Is that why . . . I mean, did you just want a pretty garden, even as a Strigoi?"

The question was unexpected and seemed to throw her off. I was about to give up on an answer when she finally said, "No. I never thought about *pretty*. They were . . . I don't know. Something to do. I'd always grown flowers. I had to see if I still could. It was like . . . a test of my skills, I guess."

I met Dimitri's eyes again. So. Beauty hadn't been part of her world. It was just like I'd told him. Strigoi were notoriously arrogant, and it seemed the

flowers had simply been a show of prowess. Growing them had also been a familiar habit for her, and I recalled how Dimitri had read Western novels while Strigoi. Being Strigoi might cost someone their sense of goodness and morality, but old behaviors and hobbies remained.

We took her out to the living room, interrupting a conversation between Victor and Robert. Sonya and Robert both froze, sizing each other up. Victor gave us one of his knowing smiles.

"Up and around. Have we found out what we need yet?"

Dimitri shot him a look similar to what I'd received when asking about interrogation. "Not yet."

Sonya dragged her gaze from Robert and moved quickly toward the patio door, pausing when she saw our shoddy patch job. "You broke my door," she said.

"Collateral damage," I said. In my periphery, I think Dimitri rolled his eyes.

Needing no guidance from us, Sonya opened the door and stepped outside. With a gasp, she came to a halt and stared upward. The sky was a perfect, cloudless blue, and the sun had crossed the horizon now, illuminating everything in gold. I went outside too, feeling the warmth of that light on my skin. Some of the night's coldness lingered, but we were in store for a hot day.

Everyone else came out too, but Sonya was oblivious. She lifted her hands upward, as though maybe she could grab hold of the sun and wrap it in her arms. "It's so beautiful." She finally looked away and met my eyes. "Isn't it? Have you ever seen anything so beautiful?"

"Beautiful," I reiterated. For some reason, I felt both happy and sad.

She walked around her yard, examining every plant and flower. She touched the petals and inhaled their fragrance. "So different . . ." she kept saying to herself. "So different in the sun . . ." Several especially caught her attention. "These don't open at night! Do you see it? Do you see the colors? Can you smell that?"

The questions didn't seem to be for anyone in particular. We watched, all of us kind of hypnotized. At last, she settled into the patio chair, happily gazing around, lost in sensory overload—in that beauty that had been denied to her as a Strigoi. When it became obvious she wasn't leaving for a while, I turned to Dimitri and repeated Sydney's advice about him taking a turn at sleeping while we waited for Sonya to recover. To my surprise, he actually agreed.

"That's smart. Once Sonya's able to talk, we'll need to move." He smiled. "Sydney's turning into a battle mastermind."

"Hey, she's not in charge here," I teased. "She's just a soldier."

"Right." He lightly brushed his fingers against my cheek. "Sorry, Captain."

"General," I corrected, catching my breath at that brief touch.

He gave Sonya a kind goodbye before disappearing into the house. She nodded, but I don't know if she really heard. Victor and Robert brought out two wooden kitchen chairs and set them in the shade. I chose a spot on the ground. Nobody spoke. It wasn't the weirdest thing I'd ever experienced, but it was certainly strange.

Sydney returned later with the groceries, and I briefly abandoned the group to check in with her. Victor's keys were lying back on the counter, which I took as a good sign. Sydney unloaded an assortment of food and handed me a

box of a dozen donuts.

"Hope that's enough for you," she remarked.

I made a face at her presumption but took the donuts anyway. "Come on outside when you're done," I told her. "It's like the barbecue of the damned. Except . . . there's no grill."

She looked puzzled, but when she joined us later, she seemed to get what I'd been saying. Robert brought out a bowl of Cheerios, but neither Sydney nor Victor ate. I gave Sonya a donut, the first thing that took her attention from her yard. She held it in her hands, turning it over and over.

"I don't know if I can. I don't know if I can eat it."

"Of course you can." I recalled how Dimitri had regarded food uncertainly too. "It's chocolate-glazed. Good stuff."

She took a tentative, rabbit-sized bite. She chewed it a billion times and finally swallowed. She closed her eyes briefly and sighed. "Such sweetness." Slowly, she continued taking more tiny bites. It took forever for her to get halfway through the donut, and at that point, she finally stopped. I'd polished off three donuts by then, and my impatience to accomplish something was growing. Part of it was still the irritability from spirit, and part of it was just my continual restlessness to help Lissa.

"Sonya," I said pleasantly, fully aware of how pissed off Dimitri was going to be at me defying his instructions. "We wanted to talk to you about something."

"Mm-hmm," she said, gazing at bees hovering around some honeysuckle.

"Is there a relative of yours . . . someone who, uh, had a baby a while ago . . . ?"

"Sure," she said. One of the bees flew from the honeysuckle to a rose, and she never looked away. "Lots."

"Articulate, Rosemarie," remarked Victor. "Very articulate."

I bit my lip, knowing an outburst would upset Sonya. And probably Robert too.

"This would be a secret baby," I told her. "And you were the beneficiary on a bank account that took care of the baby . . . an account paid for by Eric Dragomir."

Sonya's head whipped toward me, and there was no dreamy absentmindedness in her blue eyes now. A few seconds passed before she spoke. Her voice was cold and hard—not a Strigoi voice, but definitely a *back off* voice. "No. I don't know anything about that."

"She's lying," said Robert.

"I didn't need any powers to figure that out," scoffed Sydney.

I ignored both of them. "Sonya, we know you know, and it's really important we find this baby . . . er, child. Person." We'd made guesses on the age but weren't 100 percent sure. "You said you were worried about Lissa earlier. This will help her. She *needs* to know. She needs to know she has another family member."

Sonya turned her attention back to the bees, but I knew she was no longer watching them. "I don't know anything." There was a trembling in her voice, and something told me that maybe I shouldn't push this after all. I couldn't tell if she was afraid or on the verge of rage.

"Then why were you on the account?" This came from Victor.

"I don't know anything," she repeated. Her voice could have made icicles form on the ornamental trees. "Nothing."

"Stop lying," snapped Victor. "You know something, and you're going to tell us."

"Hey!" I exclaimed. "Be quiet. You don't have interrogation rights here."

"You didn't seem to be doing a very good job."

"Just shut up, okay?" I looked back at Sonya, replacing my glare with a smile. "Please," I begged. "Lissa's in trouble. This will help her. I thought you said before that you wanted to help her?"

"I promised . . ." said Sonya. Her voice was so low, I could barely hear it.

"Promised what?" I asked. *Patience, patience.* I had to remain calm. I couldn't risk a breakdown.

She squeezed her eyes shut and raked her hands through her hair violently, almost like a child about to have a tantrum. "Promised not to tell. Promised not to tell anyone . . ."

I had the urge to run over and shake her. *Patience, patience*, I repeated to myself. *Don't upset her.* "We wouldn't ask you to break your promise if it wasn't important. Maybe . . . maybe you can get in touch with this person . . ." Who had she promised? Eric's mistress? "And see if it's okay to tell us?"

"Oh for God's sake," said Victor irritably. "This is ridiculous and getting us nowhere." He glanced at his brother. "Robert?"

Robert hadn't done much so far today, but at Victor's command, Robert leaned forward. "Sonya?"

Still obviously distraught, she turned to look at him . . . and her face went still.

"Tell us what we need to know," said Robert. His voice wasn't kind so much as smooth and lulling, with a faintly sinister touch. "Tell us who and where this child is. Tell us who the mother is."

This time, I did jump to my feet. Robert was using compulsion on her to get the answers. Sonya's eyes stayed locked on him, but her body began to shake. Her lips parted, though no sound came out. A tangle of thoughts swirled in my mind. Compulsion would get us what we needed to know, but something told me, it wasn't right—

Sonya stopped me from any more pondering. She shot up almost as quickly as I had. She was still staring at Robert, but no longer in that transfixed, hypnotized way. She'd broken the compulsion, and now . . . now she was pissed. The features that had been scared and fragile earlier were filled with fury. I had no magical senses, but after being with Lissa, I knew raging spirit when I saw it. Sonya was a bomb, about to explode.

"How dare you . . ." she hissed. "How *dare* you try to compel me?"

Plants and vines near Robert suddenly sprang to life, growing to impossible heights. They reached out, tangled themselves around his chair's legs, and pulled. The chair toppled over, Robert along with it. Victor moved to help his brother, but Robert was already taking matters into his own hands. Recovering remarkably fast, he narrowed his eyes at Sonya, and she went flying backward, slamming against the wooden fence. Air users could do that trick sometimes, but this wasn't air blowing her back. This was spirit's telekinetic abilities. He apparently possessed them outside of dreams too.

Lovely.

I'd seen spirit users battle it out before, when Avery Lazar and Lissa had gone one on one. That hadn't been pretty, particularly since more than this exterior psychic phenomena had occurred. Avery had actually dug into Lissa's mind—and mine. I didn't know Robert or Sonya's full skill set, but this couldn't end well.

"Dimitri!" I yelled, springing toward Sonya. I didn't exactly know what I was going to do, but tackling her seemed like a sound plan. From what I'd observed, a lot of spirit involved eye contact with the target.

And sure enough, when I managed to wrestle her to the ground, she struggled half-heartedly but mostly fought to keep her gaze on Robert. He screamed in sudden alarm, looking down at his own body in terror. Sonya was planting visions into his head. His expression hardened. He had to know it was an illusion, and a few moments later, he looked up, having broken her spell like she'd broken his earlier compulsion.

Dimitri came tearing out the door at that point, just as Robert used his mind to fling one of the chairs toward Sonya. Of course, I was on top of her, so the chair hit *me* in the back. Dimitri picked up pretty quickly what was going on and ran toward Robert, attempting the same tactic as me. Victor, possibly thinking his brother was in physical danger, tried to pry Dimitri away, which was futile. More vines began to reach toward Robert, and I realized constraining Sonya wasn't all that useful.

"Get him inside!" I yelled to Dimitri. "Get him away from her!"

Dimitri had already guessed that and began dragging Robert toward the door. Even with Victor interfering, Dimitri's strength was enough to get Robert out of there and back into the house. As soon as her target was gone, all the energy seemed to fade out of Sonya. She made no more efforts to fight me and collapsed to the ground. I was relieved, having feared she'd turn on me once Robert was gone. Tentatively, still on guard, I helped Sonya sit up. She leaned against me, weak as a rag doll, and cried into my shoulder. Another breakdown.

After that, it was a matter of damage control. In order to keep the spirit users apart, Dimitri had taken Robert to the bedroom and left Victor with him. Robert seemed as worn out as Sonya, and Dimitri deemed the brothers safe enough to leave alone. Sonya collapsed on the couch, and after both Dimitri and I had tried to calm her down, we stepped away while Sydney held the Moroi woman's hand.

I briefly recapped what had happened. Dimitri's face grew more and more incredulous as I did.

"I told you it wasn't time!" he exclaimed. "What were you thinking? She's too weak!"

"You call that weak? And hey, I was doing fine! It wasn't until Victor and Robert got involved that things went to hell."

Dimitri took a step toward me, anger radiating off him. "They should never have gotten involved. This is you, acting irrational again, jumping in foolishly with no thought of the consequences."

Outrage shot through me in return. "Hey, I was trying to make progress here. If being rational is sitting around and doing therapy, then I'm happy to

jump over the edge. I'm not afraid to get in the game."

"You have no idea what you're saying," he growled. We were standing closer now, hardly any space left between us as we engaged in our battle of wills. "This may have set us back."

"This set us *forward*. We found out she knows about Eric Dragomir. The problem is she promised not to tell anyone about this baby."

"Yes, I promised," piped up Sonya. Dimitri and I turned as one, realizing our argument was fully visible and audible to Sonya and Sydney. "I promised." Her voice was very small and weak, pleading with us.

Sydney squeezed her hand. "We know. It's okay. It's okay to keep promises. I understand."

Sonya looked at her gratefully. "Thank you. Thank you."

"But," said Sydney carefully, "I heard that you care about Lissa Dragomir."

"I can't," interrupted Sonya, turning fearful again.

"I know, I know. But what if there was a way to help her without breaking your promise?"

Sonya stared at Sydney. Dimitri glanced at me questioningly. I shrugged and then stared at Sydney too. If someone had asked who could stage the best intervention with a crazy woman who'd formerly been an undead monster, Sydney Sage would have been my last guess.

Sonya frowned, all attention on Sydney. "W-what do you mean?"

"Well . . . what did you promise exactly? Not to tell anyone that Eric Dragomir had a mistress and baby?"

Sonya nodded.

"And not to tell who they were?"

Sonya nodded again.

Sydney gave Sonya the warmest, friendliest smile I'd ever seen on the Alchemist. "Did you promise not to tell anyone where they are?" Sonya nodded, and Sydney's smile faltered a little. Then, her eyes lit up. "Did you promise not to *lead* anyone to where they are?"

Sonya hesitated, no doubt turning every word over in her mind. Slowly, she shook her head. "No."

"So . . . you could lead us to them. But not tell us where they actually are. You wouldn't be breaking the promise that way."

It was the most convoluted, ridiculous piece of logic I'd heard in a while. It was something I would have come up with.

"Maybe . . ." said Sonya, still uncertain.

"You wouldn't break the promise," Sydney repeated. "And it would really, really help Lissa."

I stepped forward. "It would help Mikhail too."

Sonya's mouth dropped open at the mention of her former lover. "Mikhail? You know him?"

"He's my friend. He's Lissa's friend too." I almost said that if we found the missing Dragomir, we could then take Sonya to Mikhail. Recalling Dimitri's feelings of unworthiness, I decided to avoid that tactic just now. I didn't know how Sonya would react to a reunion with her beloved. "And he wants to help Lissa. But he can't. None of us can. We don't have enough information."

"Mikhail . . ." Sonya looked down at her hands again, small tears running

down her cheeks.

"You won't break your promise." Sydney was so compelling she could have been a spirit user. "Just lead us. It's what Mikhail and Lissa would want. It's the right thing to do."

I don't know which argument convinced Sonya the most. It could have been the part about Mikhail. Or it could have been the idea of doing "the right thing." Maybe, like Dimitri, Sonya wanted redemption for her Strigoi crimes and saw this as a chance. Looking up, she swallowed and met my eyes.

"I'll lead you there," she whispered.

"We're going on another road trip," Sydney declared. "Get ready."

Dimitri and I were still standing right next to each other, the anger between us beginning to diffuse. Sydney looked proud and continued trying her best to soothe Sonya.

Dimitri looked down at me with a small smile that shifted slightly when he seemed to become aware of just how close we were. I couldn't say for sure, though. His face gave little away. As for me, I was very aware of our proximity and felt intoxicated by his body and scent. Damn. Why did fighting with him always increase my attraction to him? His smile returned as he tilted his head toward Sydney. "You were wrong. She really is the new general in town."

I smiled back, hoping he wasn't aware of my body's reaction to us standing so close. "Maybe. But, it's okay. You can still be colonel."

He arched an eyebrow. "Oh? Did you demote yourself? Colonel's right below general. What's that make you?"

I reached into my pocket and triumphantly flashed the CR-V keys I'd swiped when we'd come back inside. "The driver," I said.

TWENTY-ONE

I DIDN'T GET TO DRIVE.

"General" Sydney didn't either, much to her outrage, though Dimitri did some fast-talking to explain why.

It all started when Victor discovered his car was having "engine trouble." He wasn't very happy about that. He made no accusations, but I think everyone there—even Sonya and Robert—could guess the malfunction wasn't coincidental. This meant we all had to pile in the CR-V, which hadn't been designed to seat so many people—which was why Dimitri had come up with a creative seating plan. Of course, one of those "seats" turned out to be the cargo space in the back. It was good-sized, but when Sydney learned it was *her* seat, she accused Dimitri of adding insult to the injury of taking her keys.

I wouldn't tell her so, but putting her back there was a sound choice. Dimitri's seating chart was configured to minimize threats inside the car. Dimitri drove, with Robert going shotgun, and me between Victor and Sonya in the backseat. This put a guardian in each row, separated the brothers, and kept the spirit users apart too. When I argued that he and I could switch spots and still maintain the same security, Dimitri pointed out that having me at the wheel wouldn't be safe if I had to suddenly flip to Lissa's mind. It was a fair point. As for Sydney . . . well, she was neither a threat nor a fighting force, so she got offloaded to the back. And speaking of dead weight . . .

"We have *got* to get rid of Victor and Robert now," I murmured to Dimitri, as we loaded the CR-V with groceries and our meager luggage (further reducing Sydney's space, much to her outrage). "They've done what we needed. Keeping them is dangerous. It's time to turn them over to the guardians." The brothers wanted to continue on with us in order to find Lissa's sibling. We were letting them—but not out of generosity. We simply couldn't let them out of our sights yet.

"Agreed," Dimitri said, frowning slightly. "But there's no good way to do it. Not yet. We can't leave them tied up beside the road; I wouldn't put it past them to escape and hitchhike. We also can't turn them in ourselves, for obvious reasons."

I set a bag inside the car and leaned against the bumper. "Sydney could turn them in."

Dimitri nodded. "That's probably our best bet—but I don't want to part with her until we get to . . . well, wherever we're going. We might need her help."

I sighed. "And so, we drag them along."

"Afraid so," he said. He gave me wary look. "You know, when they are in custody, there's a very good chance they'll have quite a story to tell the authorities about us."

"Yeah." I'd been thinking about that too. "I guess that's a problem for later. Gotta deal with the immediate problems first."

To my surprise, Dimitri smiled at me. I would have expected some prudent, wise remark. "Well, that's always been our strategy, hasn't it?" he asked.

I smiled in return, but it was short-lived, once we hit the road. Mercifully, Victor wasn't his usual annoying chatty self—which I suspected was because he was growing weak from lack of blood. Sonya and Robert had to be feeling the same way. This was going to be a problem if we didn't get a feeder soon, but I didn't know how we were going to pull that off. I had the impression Sydney hadn't realized any of this yet, which was just as well. Being a human among a group of hungry vampires would certainly make me nervous. She was actually probably safer sequestered in the back from everyone else.

Sonya's directions were vague and very need-to-know. She only gave us short-term information and often wouldn't warn about a turn until we were right on top of it. We had no idea where we were going or how long it would take. She scanned a map and then told Dimitri to go north on I-75. When we asked how long our trip would take, her response was: "Not long. A few hours. Maybe more."

And with that mysterious explanation, she settled back in her seat and said no more. There was a haunted, pensive expression on her face, and I tried to imagine how she felt. Only a day ago she'd been Strigoi. Was she still processing what had happened? Was she seeing the faces of her victims as Dimitri had? Was she tormenting herself with guilt? Did she want to become Strigoi again?

I left her alone. Now wasn't the time for therapy. I settled back, preparing myself to be patient. A tingle of consciousness suddenly sparked in the bond, shifting my attention inward. Lissa was awake. I blinked and looked at the dashboard clock. Afternoon for humans. The Moroi at Court should have been long asleep by now. But no, something had awakened her.

Two guardians stood at her door, faces impassive. "You have to come with us," one of them said. "It's time for the next test."

Astonishment filled Lissa. She'd known the next test was "coming soon" but hadn't heard any further details since returning from the endurance test. That trip had taken place during the Moroi night too, but she'd at least had fair warning. Eddie stood nearby in her room, having replaced my mother as Lissa's protection a few hours ago. Christian sat up in Lissa's bed, yawning. They hadn't gotten hot and heavy, but Lissa liked having him around. Snuggling with her boyfriend while Eddie was in the room didn't seem as weird to her as it did when my mom was there. I didn't blame her.

"Can I change?" Lissa asked.

"Be quick," said the guardian.

She grabbed the first outfit she could and hurried to the bathroom, feeling confused and nervous. When she came out, Christian had pulled on his jeans already and was reaching for his T-shirt. Eddie meanwhile was sizing up the guardians, and I could guess his thoughts because I would have shared the

same ones. This wakeup call seemed official, but he didn't know these guardians and didn't totally trust them.

"Can I escort her?" he asked.

"Only as far as the testing area," said the second guardian.

"What about me?" asked Christian.

"Only as far as the testing area."

The guardians' answers surprised me, but then, I realized it was probably common for monarch candidates to go to their tests with entourages—even unexpected tests in the middle of the night. Or maybe not so unexpected. The Court's grounds were virtually deserted, but when her group reached their destination—a small, out of the way section of an old brick building—she had to pass several groups of Moroi lining the halls. Apparently, word had gotten out.

Those gathered stepped aside respectfully. Some—probably advocates of other families—gave her scowls. But lots of other people smiled at her and called out about "the dragon's return." A few even brushed their hands against her arms, as though taking luck or power from her. The crowd was much smaller than the one who'd greeted her after the first test. This eased her anxiety but didn't shake her earlier resolve to take the tests seriously. The faces of the onlookers shone with awe and curiosity, wondering if she might be the next to rule them.

A doorway at the end of the hall marked the conclusion of her journey. Neither Christian nor Eddie needed to be told that this was as far as they could go. Lissa glanced at the two of them over her shoulder before following one of the guardians inside, taking comfort from her loved ones' supportive faces.

After the epic adventure of the first test, Lissa expected something equally intimidating. What she found instead was an old Moroi woman sitting comfortably in a chair in a mostly empty room. Her hands were folded in her lap, holding something wrapped in cloth. The woman hummed, seeming very content. And when I say old, I mean she was *old*. Moroi could live until their early 100s, and this woman had clearly crossed that mark. Her pale skin was a maze of wrinkles, and her gray hair was wispy and thin. She smiled when she saw Lissa and nodded toward an empty chair. A small table sat beside it with a glass pitcher of water. The guardians left the women alone.

Lissa glanced around her surroundings. There were no other furnishings, though there was a plain door opposite the one she had come through. She sat down and then turned toward the old woman. "Hello," said Lissa, trying to keep her voice strong. "I'm Vasilisa Dragomir."

The woman's small smile grew, showing her yellowed teeth. One of her fangs was missing. "Always such manners in your family," she croaked. "Most people come in here and demand we get down to business. But I remember your grandfather. He was polite during his test as well."

"You knew my grandfather?" exclaimed Lissa. He had died when she was very, very young. Then, she picked up another meaning in the woman's words. "He ran for king?"

The woman nodded. "Passed all his tests. I think he would have won the election, if he hadn't withdrawn at the last moment. After that, it was a coin's toss between Tatiana Ivashkov and Jacob Tarus. Very close, that one. The

Taruses still hold a grudge."

Lissa had never heard any of this. "Why'd my grandfather withdraw?"

"Because your brother had just been born. Frederick decided he needed to devote his energy to his fledgling family, instead of a nation."

Lissa could understand this. How many Dragomirs were there back then? Her grandfather, her father, and Andre—and her mother, but only by marriage. Eric Dragomir hadn't had any brothers or sisters. Lissa knew little about her grandfather, but in his place, she decided that she too would have rather spent time with her son and grandson, instead of listening to the endless speeches Tatiana had had to deal with.

Lissa's mind had wandered, and the old woman was watching her carefully. "Is . . . this the test?" asked Lissa, once the silence had gone on too long. "Is it, like, an interview?"

The old woman shook her head. "No. It's this." She unwrapped the object in her lap. It was a cup—a chalice or a goblet. I'm not sure which. But it was beautiful, made of silver that seemed to glow with its own light. Blood-red rubies were scattered along the sides, glittering with each turn of the cup. The woman regarded it fondly.

"Over a thousand years old, and it still gleams." She took the pitcher and filled the chalice with water while Lissa and I processed the words. A thousand years? I was no metal expert, but even I knew silver should have tarnished in that time. The woman held out the cup to Lissa. "Drink from it. And when you want to stop, say'stop.'"

Lissa reached for the cup, more confused than ever by the odd instructions. What was she supposed to stop? Drinking? As soon as her fingers touched the metal, she understood. Well, kind of. A tingle ran through her, one she knew well.

"This is charmed," she said.

The old woman nodded. "Infused with all four elements and a spell long since forgotten."

Charmed with spirit too, thought Lissa. That too must have been forgotten, and it put her on edge. Elemental charms had different effects. Earth charms—like the tattoo she'd been given—were often tied with minor compulsion spells. The combination of all four in a stake or ward provided a unified blast of life that blocked the undead. But spirit . . . well, she was quickly learning that spirit charms covered a wide range of unpredictable effects. The water no doubt activated the spell, but Lissa had a feeling that spirit was going to be the key player. Even though it was the power that burned in her blood, it still scared her. The spell woven into this cup was complex, far beyond her skills, and she feared what it would do. The old woman stared unblinkingly.

Lissa hesitated only a moment more. She drank.

The world faded away, then rematerialized into something completely different. She and I both recognized what this was: a spirit dream.

She no longer stood in the plain room. She was outdoors, wind whipping her long hair in front of her face. She brushed it aside as best she could. Other people stood around her, all of them in black, and she soon recognized the Court's church and graveyard. Lissa herself wore black, along with a long wool coat to protect against the chill. They were gathered around a grave, and a

priest stood near it, his robes of office offering the only color on that gray day.

Lissa took a few steps over, trying to see whose name was on the tombstone. What she discovered shocked me more than her: ROSEMARIE HATHAWAY.

My name was carved into the granite in regal, elaborate font. Below my name was the star of battle, signifying that I'd killed more Strigoi than could be counted. Go me. Beneath that were three lines of text in Russian, Romanian, and English. I didn't need the English translation to know what each line said because it was standard for a guardian's grave: "Eternal Service."

The priest spoke customary funeral words, giving me the blessings of a religion I wasn't sure I believed in. That was the least weird thing here, however, seeing as I was watching my own funeral. When he finished, Alberta took his place. Lauding the deceased's achievements was also normal at a guardian's funeral—and Alberta had plenty to say about mine. Had I been there, I would have been moved to tears. She concluded by describing my last battle, how I'd died defending Lissa.

That actually didn't weird me out so much. I mean, don't get me wrong. Everything going on here was completely insane. But, reasonably speaking, if I was actually watching my own funeral, it made sense that I would have died protecting her.

Lissa didn't share my feelings. The news was a slap in the face to her. She suddenly became aware of a horrible empty feeling in her chest, like part of her was gone. The bond only worked one way, yet Robert had sworn losing his bondmate had left him in agony. Lissa understood it now, that terrible, lonely ache. She was missing something she'd never even known she'd had. Tears brimmed in her eyes.

This is a dream, she told herself. *That's all.* But she'd never had a spirit dream like this. Her experiences had always been with Adrian, and the dreams had felt like telephone calls.

When the mourners dispersed from the graveyard, Lissa felt a hand touch her shoulder. Christian. She threw herself gratefully into his arms, trying hard to hold back sobs. He felt real and solid. Safe. "How did this happen?" she asked. "How could it have happened?"

Christian released her, his crystal-blue eyes more serious and sorrowful than I'd ever seen. "You know how. Those Strigoi were trying to kill you. She sacrificed herself to save you."

Lissa had no memory of this, but it didn't matter. "I can't . . . I can't believe this is happening." That agonizing emptiness grew within her.

"I have more bad news," said Christian.

She stared in astonishment. "How could this get any worse?"

"I'm leaving."

"Leaving . . . what? Court?"

"Yes. Leaving everything." The sadness on his face grew. "Leaving you."

Her jaw nearly dropped. "What . . . what's wrong? What did I do?"

"Nothing." He squeezed her hand and let it go. "I love you. I'll always love you. But you are who you are. You're the last Dragomir. There'll always be something taking you away . . . I'd just get in your way. You need to rebuild your family. I'm not the one you need."

"Of course you are! You are the *only* one! The only one I want to build my

future with."

"You say that now, but just wait. There are better choices. You heard Adrian's joke. 'Little Dragomirs'? When you're ready for kids in a few years, you're going to need a bunch. The Dragomirs need to be solid again. And me? I'm not responsible enough to handle that."

"You'd be a great father," she argued.

"Yeah," he scoffed, "and I'd be a big asset to you too—the princess married to the guy from the Strigoi family."

"I don't care about any of that, and you know it!" She clutched at his shirt, forcing him to look at her. "I love you. I want you to be part of my life. None of this makes sense. Are you scared? Is that it? Are you scared of the weight of my family name?"

He averted his eyes. "Let's just say it's not an easy name to carry."

She shook him. "I don't believe you! You're not afraid of anything! You never back down."

"I'm backing down now." He gently removed himself from her. "I really do love you. That's why I'm doing this. It's for the best."

"But you can't . . ." Lissa gestured toward my grave, but he was already walking away. "You can't! She's gone. If you're gone too, there'll be no one . . ."

But Christian *was* gone, disappearing into fog that hadn't been there minutes ago. Lissa was left with only my tombstone for company. And for the first time in her life, she was really and truly alone. She had felt alone when her family died, but I'd been her anchor, always at her back, protecting her. When Christian had come along, he too had kept the loneliness away, filling her heart with love.

But now . . . now we were both gone. Her family was gone. That hole inside threatened to consume her, and it was more than just the loss of the bond. Being alone is a terrible, terrible thing. There's no one to run to, no one to confide in, no one who cares what happens to you. She'd been alone in the woods, but that was nothing like this. Nothing like it at all.

Staring around, she wished she could go sink into my grave and end her torment. No . . . wait. She really could end it. *Say "stop,"* the old woman had said. That was all it took to stop this pain. This was a spirit dream, right? True, it was more realistic and all-consuming than any she'd ever faced, but in the end, all dreamers woke up. One word, and this would become a fading nightmare.

Staring around at the empty Court, she almost said the word. But . . . did she want to end things? She'd vowed to fight through these trials. Would she give up over a dream? A dream about being alone? It seemed like such a minor thing, but that cold truth hit her again: *I've never been alone.* She didn't know if she could carry on by herself, but then, she realized that if this wasn't a dream—and dear God, did it feel real—there was no magic "stop" in real life. If she couldn't deal with loneliness in a dream, she never would be able to while waking. And as much as it scared her, she decided she would not back down from this. Something urged her toward the fog, and she walked toward it—alone.

The fog should have led her into the church's garden. Instead, the world rematerialized and she found herself in a Council session. It was an open one,

with a Moroi audience watching. Unlike usual, Lissa didn't sit with the audience. She was at the Council's table, with its thirteen chairs. She sat in the Dragomir seat. The middle chair, the monarch's chair, was occupied by Ariana Szelsky. *Definitely a dream,* some wry part of her thought. She had a Council spot and Ariana was queen. Too good to be true.

Like always, the Council was in a heated debate, and the topic was familiar: the age decree. Some Council members argued that it was immoral. Others argued that the Strigoi threat was too great. Desperate times called for desperate actions, those people said.

Ariana peered down the table at Lissa. "What does the Dragomir family think?" Ariana was neither as kind as she'd been in the van nor as hostile as Tatiana had been. Ariana was neutral, a queen running a Council and gathering the information she needed. Every set of eyes in the room turned toward Lissa.

For some reason, every coherent idea had fled out of her head. Her tongue felt thick in her mouth. What did she think? What was her opinion of the age decree? She desperately tried to dredge up an answer.

"I . . . I think it's bad."

Lee Szelsky, who must have taken the family spot when Ariana became queen, snorted in disgust. "Can you elaborate, princess?"

Lissa swallowed. "Lowering the guardian age isn't the way to protect us. We need . . . we need to learn to protect ourselves too."

Her words were met with more contempt and shock. "And pray tell," said Howard Zeklos, "how do you plan to do that? What's your proposal? Mandatory training for all ages? Start a program in the schools?"

Again Lissa groped for words. What *was* the plan? She and Tasha had discussed it lots of times, strategizing this very issue of how to implement training. Tasha had practically pounded those details into her head in the hopes Lissa could make her voice heard. Here she was now, representing her family on the Council, with the chance to change things and improve Moroi life. All she had to do was explain herself. So many were counting on her, so many waiting to hear the words she felt so passionately about. But what were they? Why couldn't Lissa remember? She must have taken too long to answer because Howard threw his hands up in disgust.

"I knew it. We were idiots to let a little girl on this Council. She has nothing useful to offer. The Dragomirs are gone. They've died with her, and we need to accept that."

They've died with her. The pressure of being the last of her line had weighed on Lissa since the moment a doctor had told her that her parents and brother had died. The last of a line that had empowered the Moroi and produced some of the greatest kings and queens. She'd vowed to herself over and over that she wouldn't disappoint that lineage, that she would see her family's pride restored. And now it was all falling apart.

Even Ariana, whom Lissa had considered a supporter, looked disappointed. The audience began to jeer, echoing the call of removing this tongue-tied child from the Council. They yelled for her to leave. Then, worse still: "The dragon is dead! The dragon is dead!"

Lissa almost tried again to make her speech, but then something made her

look behind her. There, the twelve family seals hung on the wall. A man had appeared out of nowhere and was taking down the Dragomir's crest, with its dragon and Romanian inscription. Lissa's heart sank as the shouts in the room became louder and her humiliation grew. She rose, wanting to run out of there and hide from the disgrace. Instead, her feet took her to the wall with its seals. With more strength than she thought herself capable of possessing, she jerked the dragon seal away from the man.

"No!" she yelled. She turned her gaze to the audience and held up the seal, challenging any of them to come take it from her or deny her her rightful place on the Council. "This. Is. Mine. Do you hear me? *This is mine!*"

She would never know if they heard because they disappeared, just like the graveyard. Silence fell. She now sat in one of the medical examining rooms back at St. Vladimir's. The familiar details were oddly comforting: the sink with its orange hand soap, the neatly labeled cupboards and drawers, and even the informative health posters on the walls. STUDENTS: PRACTICE SAFE SEX!

Equally welcome was the school's resident physician: Dr. Olendzki. The doctor wasn't alone. Standing around Lissa—who sat on top of an examination bed—were a therapist named Deirdre and . . . me. Seeing myself there was pretty wacky, but after the funeral, I was just starting to roll with all of this.

A surprising mix of feelings raced through Lissa, feelings out of her control. Happiness to see us. Despair at life. Confusion. Suspicion. She couldn't seem to get a hold of one emotion or thought. It was a very different feeling from the Council, when she just hadn't been able to explain herself. Her mind had been orderly—she'd just lost track of her point. Here, there was nothing to keep track of. She was a mental mess.

"Do you understand?" asked Dr. Olendzki. Lissa suspected the doctor had already asked this question. "It's beyond what we can control. Medication no longer works."

"Believe me, we don't want you hurting yourself. But now that others are at risk . . . well, you understand why we have to take action." This was Deirdre. I'd always thought of her as smug, particularly since her therapeutic method involved answering questions with questions. There was no sly humor now. Deirdre was deadly earnest.

None of their words made sense to Lissa, but the *hurting yourself* part triggered something in her. She looked down at her arms. They were bare . . . and marred with cuts. The cuts she used to make when the pressure of spirit grew too great. They'd been her only outlet, a horrible type of release. Studying them now, Lissa saw the cuts were bigger and deeper than before. The kinds of cuts that danced with suicide. She looked back up.

"Who . . . who did I hurt?"

"You don't remember?" asked Dr. Olendzki.

Lissa shook her head, looking desperately from face to face, seeking answers. Her gaze fell on me, and my face was as dark and somber as Deirdre's. "It's okay, Liss," I said. "It's all going to be okay."

I wasn't surprised at that. Naturally, it was what I would say. I would always reassure Lissa. I would always take care of her.

"It's not important," said Deirdre, voice soft and soothing. "What's important

is no one else ever gets hurt. You don't want to hurt anyone, do you?"

Of course Lissa didn't, but her troubled mind shifted elsewhere. "Don't talk to me like a child!" The loudness of her voice filled the room.

"I didn't mean to," said Deirdre, the paragon of patience. "We just want to help you. We want you to be safe."

Paranoia rose to the forefront of Lissa's emotions. Nowhere was safe. She was certain about that . . . but nothing else. Except maybe something about a dream. A dream, a dream . . .

"They'll be able to take care of you in Tarasov," explained Dr. Olendzki. "They'll make sure you're comfortable."

"Tarasov?" Lissa and I spoke in unison. This other Rose clenched her fists and glared. Again, a typical reaction for me.

"She is *not* going to that place," growled Rose.

"Do you think we want to do this?" asked Deirdre. It was the first time I'd really seen her cool façade crumble. "We don't. But the spirit . . . what it's doing . . . we have no choice . . ."

Images of our trip to Tarasov flashed through Lissa's mind. The cold, cold corridors. The moans. The tiny cells. She remembered seeing the psychiatric ward, the section other spirit users were locked up in. Locked up indefinitely.

"No!" she cried, jumping up from the table. "Don't send me to Tarasov!" She looked around for escape. The women stood between her and the door. Lissa couldn't run. What magic could she use? Surely there was something. Her mind touched spirit, as she rifled for a spell.

Other-Rose grabbed a hold of her hand, likely because she'd felt the stirrings of spirit and wanted to stop Lissa. "There's another way," my alter ego told Deirdre and Dr. Olendzki. "I can pull it from her. I can pull it all from her, like Anna did for St. Vladimir. I can take away the darkness and instability. Lissa will be sane again."

Everyone stared at me. Well, the other me.

"But then it'll be in you, right?" asked Dr. Olendzki. "It won't disappear."

"I don't care," I told them stubbornly. "I'll go to Tarasov. Don't send her. I can do it as long as she needs me to."

Lissa watched me, scarcely believing what she heard. Her chaotic thoughts turned joyous. *Yes! Escape*. She wouldn't go crazy. She wouldn't go to Tarasov. Then, somewhere in the jumble of her memories . . .

"Anna committed suicide," murmured Lissa. Her grasp on reality was still tenuous, but that sobering thought was enough to momentarily calm her racing mind. "She went crazy from helping St. Vladimir."

My other self refused to look at Lissa. "It's just a story. I'll take the darkness. Send me."

Lissa didn't know what to do or think. She didn't want to go to Tarasov. That prison gave her nightmares. And here I was, offering her escape, offering to save her like I always did. Lissa wanted that. She wanted to be saved. She didn't want to go insane like all the other spirit users. If she accepted my offer, she would be free.

Yet . . . on the edge or not, she cared about me too much. I had made too many sacrifices for her. How could she let me do this? What kind of friend would she be, to condemn me to that life? Tarasov scared Lissa. A life in a

cage scared Lissa. But me facing that scared her even more.

There was no good outcome here. She wished it would all just go away. Maybe if she just closed her eyes . . . wait. She remembered again. The dream. She was in a spirit dream. All she had to do was wake up.

Say "stop."

It was easier this time. Saying that word was the simple way out, the perfect solution. No Tarasov for either of us, right? Then, she felt a lightening of the pressure on her mind, a stilling of those chaotic feelings. Her eyes widened as she realized I had already started pulling away the darkness. *"Stop"* was forgotten.

"No!" Spirit burned through her, and she threw up a wall in the bond, blocking me from her.

"What are you doing?" my other self asked.

"Saving you," said Lissa. "Saving myself." She turned to Dr. Olendzki and Deirdre. "I understand what you have to do. It's okay. Take me to Tarasov. Take me where I won't hurt anyone else." Tarasov. A place where real nightmares walked the halls. She braced herself as the office faded away, ready for the next part of the dream: a cold stone cell, with chains on the walls and people wailing down the halls....

But when the world put itself back together, there was no Tarasov. There was an empty room with an old woman and a silver chalice. Lissa looked around. Her heart was racing, and her sense of time was off. The things she'd seen had lasted an eternity. Yet, simultaneously, it felt like only a couple seconds had passed since she and the old woman had conversed.

"What . . . what was that?" asked Lissa. Her mouth was dry, and the water sounded good now . . . but the chalice was empty.

"Your fear," said the old woman, eyes twinkling. "All your fears, laid out neatly in a row."

Lissa placed the chalice on the table with shaking hands. "It was awful. It was spirit, but it . . . it wasn't anything I've seen before. It invaded my mind, rifling through it. It was so real. There were times I believed it was real."

"But you didn't stop it."

Lissa frowned, thinking of how close she had come. "No."

The old woman smiled and said nothing.

"Am I . . . am I done?" asked Lissa, confused. "Can I go?"

The old woman nodded. Lissa stood and glanced between the two doors, the one she'd entered through and the plain one in the back. Still in shock, Lissa automatically turned toward the door she'd come through. She didn't really want to see those people lined up in the hall again but swore she'd put on a good princess face. Besides, there'd only been a fraction here compared to the group who'd greeted her after the last test. Her steps were halted when the old woman spoke again and pointed toward the back of the room.

"No. That's for those who fail. You go out this door."

Lissa turned and approached the plain door. It looked like it led outdoors, which was probably just as well. Peace and quiet. She felt like she should say something to her companion but didn't know what. So, she simply turned the knob and stepped outside . . .

Into a crowd cheering for the dragon.

TWENTY-TWO

"YOU'RE AWFULLY HAPPY."

I blinked and found Sonya staring at me. The CR-V and smooth stretch of I-75 hummed around us, the outside revealing little except Midwestern plains and trees. Sonya didn't seem quite as creepy crazy as she had back at school or even at her house. Mostly, she still just seemed scattered and confused, which was to be expected. I hesitated before answering but finally decided there was no reason to hold back.

"Lissa passed her second monarch test."

"Of course she did," said Victor. He was staring out the window away from me. The tone of his voice suggested I'd just wasted his time by saying something that was a given.

"Is she okay?" asked Dimitri. "Injured?"

Once, that would have sparked jealousy in me. Now, it was just a sign of our shared concern for Lissa.

"She's fine," I said, wondering if that was entirely true. She wasn't physically injured, but after what she'd seen . . . well, that had to leave scars of a different type. The back door had been quite a surprise too. When she'd seen a small crowd by the first door, she'd thought it meant only a few people were up that late to see the candidates. Nope. Turned out everyone was just waiting out back to see the victors. True to her promise, Lissa hadn't let it faze her. She walked out with her head held high, smiling at her onlookers and fans as though she already owned the crown.

I was growing sleepy but Lissa's triumph kept me smiling for a long time. There's something tiring about an endless, unknown stretch of highway. Victor had closed his eyes and was leaning against the glass. I couldn't see Sydney when I twisted around to check on her, meaning she also had decided on a nap or was just lying down. I yawned, wondering if I dared risk sleeping. Dimitri had urged me to when we left Sonya's house, knowing that I could use more than the couple hours Sydney had given me.

I tipped my head against the seat and closed my eyes, falling instantly asleep. The blackness of that sleep gave way to the feel of a spirit dream, and my heart leapt with both panic and joy. After living through Lissa's test, spirit dreams suddenly had a sinister feel. At the same time, this might be a chance to see Adrian. And . . . it was.

Only we appeared somewhere entirely unexpected: Sonya's garden. I stared in wonder at the clear blue sky and the brilliant flowers, nearly overlooking

Adrian in the process. He wore a dark green cashmere sweater that made him blend in. To me, he was more gorgeous than any of the garden's other wonders.

"Adrian!"

I ran to him, and he lifted me easily, spinning me around. When he placed me back on my feet, he studied the garden and nodded in approval. "I should let you pick the place more often. You have good taste. Of course, since you're dating me, we already knew that."

"What do you mean, 'pick the place?'" I asked, lacing my hands behind his neck.

He shrugged. "When I reached out and sensed you were sleeping, I summoned the dream but didn't feel like thinking up a place. So I left it to your subconscious." Irritably, he plucked at the cashmere. "I'm not dressed for the occasion, though." The sweater shimmered, soon replaced by a light gray T-shirt with an abstract design on the front. "Better?"

"Much."

He grinned and kissed the top of my forehead. "I've missed you, little dhampir. You can spy on Lissa and us all the time, but the best I get are these dreams, and honestly, I can't figure out what schedule you're on."

I realized that with my "spying," I knew more about what had just happened at Court than he did. "Lissa took her second test," I told him.

Yup. His expression verified it. He hadn't known about the test, probably because he'd been sleeping. "When?"

"Just now. It was a tough one, but she passed."

"Much to her delight, no doubt. Still . . . that keeps buying us time to clear you and get you home. Not sure I'd want to come home if I were you, though." He looked around the garden again. "West Virginia's a lot better than I thought."

I laughed. "It's not West Virginia—which isn't that bad, by the way. It's Sonya Karp's—"

I froze, unable to believe what I'd nearly said. I'd been so happy to see him, so at ease . . . I'd let myself screw up. Adrian's face grew very, very serious.

"Did you say Sonya Karp?"

Several options played out in my head. Lying was the easiest. I could claim this was some place I'd been a long time ago, like maybe she'd taken us on a field trip to her house. That was pretty flimsy, though. Plus, I was guessing the look on my face screamed guilt. I'd been caught. A pretty lie wouldn't fool Adrian.

"Yes," I said finally.

"Rose. Sonya Karp's a Strigoi."

"Not anymore."

Adrian sighed. "I knew you staying out of trouble was too good to be true. What happened?"

"Um, Robert Doru restored her."

"Robert." Adrian's lip curled in disdain. The two spirit users hadn't gotten along well. "And just because I feel like we're marching into full-fledged Crazy Territory—which means something, coming from me—I'm going to take a guess that Victor Dashkov is also with you."

I nodded, wishing desperately then that someone would wake me up and get me away from Adrian's interrogation. Damn it. How could I have slipped up like this?

Adrian released me and walked around in small circles. "Okay, so. You, Belikov, the Alchemist, Sonya Karp, Victor Dashkov, and Robert Doru are all hanging out in West Virginia together."

"No," I said.

"No?"

"We're, uh, not in West Virginia."

"Rose!" Adrian halted his pacing and strode back over to me. "Where the hell are you then? Your old man, Lissa—everyone thinks you're safe and sound."

"I am," I said haughtily. "Just not in West Virginia."

"Then where?"

"I can't . . . I can't tell you." I hated saying those words to him and seeing the look they elicited. "Part of it's for safety. Part of it's because . . . well, um, I don't actually know."

He caught hold of my hands. "You can't do this. You can't run off on some crazy whim this time. Don't you get it? They'll kill you if they find you."

"It's not a crazy whim! We're doing something important. Something that's going to help all of us."

"Something you can't tell me," he guessed.

"It's better if you're not involved," I said, squeezing his hands tightly. "Better if you don't know the details."

"And in the meantime, I can rest easy knowing you've got an elite team at your back."

"Adrian, please! Please just trust me. Trust that I've got a good reason," I begged.

He let go of my hands. "I believe you *think* you've got a good reason. I just can't imagine one that justifies you risking your life."

"It's what I do," I said, surprised at how serious I sounded. "Some things are worth it."

Pieces of static flickered across my vision, like TV reception going bad. The world started to fade. "What's going on?" I asked.

He scowled. "Someone or something's waking me up. Probably my mom checking in for the hundredth time."

I reached for him, but he was fading away. "Adrian! Please don't tell anyone! *Anyone*."

I don't know if he heard my pleas or not because the dream completely disappeared. I woke up in the car. My immediate reaction was to swear, but I didn't want to give away the idiotic thing I'd done. Glancing over, I nearly jumped out of my seat when I saw Sonya watching me intently.

"You were having a spirit dream," she said.

"How'd you know?"

"Your aura."

I made a face. "Auras used to be cool, but now they're just starting to get annoying."

She laughed softly, the first time I'd heard her do so since being restored. "They're very informative if you know how to read them. Were you with

Vasilisa?"

"No. My boyfriend. He's a spirit user too."

Her eyes widened in surprise. "That's who you were with?"

"Yeah. Why? What's wrong?"

She frowned, looking puzzled. A few moments later, she glanced up toward the front seat, where Dimitri and Robert sat, and then studied me in a scrutinizing way that sent chills down my spine.

"Nothing," she said. "Nothing's wrong."

I had to scoff at that. "Come on, it sure seemed like—"

"There!" Sonya abruptly turned from me, leaned forward, and pointed. "Take that exit."

We were nearly past "that exit," and Dimitri had to do some fancy maneuvering—kind of like in our escape back in Pennsylvania—to make it. The car jerked and lurched, and I heard Sydney yelp behind me.

"A little warning next time would be helpful," Dimitri noted.

Sonya wasn't listening. Her gaze was totally fixated on the road we'd pulled off onto. We came to a red light, where I caught sight of a cheery sign: WELCOME TO ANN ARBOR, MICHIGAN. The spark of life I'd seen in her moments ago was gone. Sonya had returned to her tense, almost robotic self. Despite Sydney's clever negotiating, Sonya still seemed uncomfortable about this trip. She still felt guilty and traitorous.

"Are we here?" I asked eagerly. "And how long were we on the road?" I'd hardly noticed the drive. I'd stayed awake for the first part of it, but the rest had been a blur of Lissa and Adrian.

"Six hours," said Dimitri.

"Go left at that second light," said Sonya. "Now right at the corner."

Tension built in the car. Everyone was awake now, and my heart raced as we pushed deeper and deeper into suburbia. Which house? Were we close? Was one of these it? It was a fast drive but seemed to stretch forever. We all let out a collective breath when Sonya suddenly pointed.

"There."

Dimitri pulled into the driveway of a cute brick house with a perfectly trimmed lawn. "Do you know if your relatives still live here?" I asked Sonya.

She said nothing, and I realized we were back to promise territory. Lockdown mode.

So much for progress. "I guess there's only one way to find out," I said, unbuckling my seatbelt. "Same plan?"

Earlier, Dimitri and I had discussed who would go and who would stay behind if Sonya got us to the right place. Leaving the brothers behind was a no-brainer. The question had been who would guard them, and we'd decided Dimitri would while Sydney and I went with Sonya to meet her relatives—who were undoubtedly in for a shocking visit.

"Same plan," agreed Dimitri. "You go to the house. You look less threatening."

"Hey!"

He smiled. "I said ‘look.'"

But his reasoning made sense. Even at ease, there was something powerful and intimidating about Dimitri. Three women going up to the door would

freak these people out less—especially if it turned out Sonya's relatives had moved. Hell, for all I knew, she'd purposely led us to the wrong house.

"Be careful," Dimitri said, as we got out of the car.

"You too," I replied. That got me another smile, one a little warmer and deeper.

The feelings that stirred in me flitted away as Sonya, Sydney, and I walked up the sidewalk. My chest tightened. This was it. Or was it? Were we about to reach the conclusion of our journey? Had we really found the last Dragomir, against all odds? Or had I been played from the beginning?

I wasn't the only one who was nervous. I could feel Sydney and Sonya crackling with tension too. We reached the front step. I took a deep breath and rang the doorbell.

Several seconds later, a man answered—and he was Moroi. A promising sign.

He looked at each of our faces, no doubt wondering what a Moroi, a dhampir, and a human were doing at his door. It sounded like the start of a bad joke.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

I was suddenly at a loss. Our plan had covered the big stuff: find Eric's mistress and love child. What we'd say once we actually got there wasn't so clear. I waited for one of my companions to speak up now, but there was no need. The Moroi man's head suddenly whipped to my side as he did a double take.

"Sonya?" he gasped. "Is that you?"

Then, I heard a young female voice behind him call, "Hey, who's here?"

Someone squeezed in beside him, someone tall and slim—someone I knew. My breath caught as I stared at waves of unruly light brown hair and light green eyes—eyes that should have tipped me off a long time ago. I couldn't speak.

"Rose," exclaimed Jill Mastrano. "What are you doing here?"

TWENTY-THREE

THE FEW SECONDS OF SILENCE that followed seemed to stretch out to eternity. Everyone was confused, each for totally different reasons. Jill's initial surprise had been laced with excitement, but as she stared around from face to face, her smile faded and faded until she looked as bewildered as the rest of us.

"What's going on?" asked a new voice. Moments later, Emily Mastrano appeared beside her daughter. Emily glanced at me and Sydney with curiosity and then gasped when she saw the third member of our group. "Sonya!" Emily jerked Jill back, her face filled with panic. Emily wasn't guardian-fast, but I admired her responsiveness.

"Emily . . . ?" Sonya's voice was very small, on the verge of cracking. "It . . . it's me . . . *really* me . . ."

Emily tried to tug the man inside as well but stopped when she got a good look at Sonya. Like anyone else, Emily had to acknowledge the obvious. Sonya had no Strigoi features. Plus, she was out in broad daylight. Emily faltered and opened her mouth to speak, but her lips couldn't quite manage it. She finally turned to me.

"Rose . . . what's going on?"

I was surprised that she would regard me as an authority, both because we'd only met once and because I honestly wasn't sure what was going on either. It took me a few attempts to find my voice. "I think . . . I think we should come inside . . ."

Emily's gaze fell back on Sonya. Jill tried to push forward to see what all the drama was about, but Emily continued blocking the door, still not totally convinced it was safe. I couldn't blame her. At last, she gave a slow nod and stepped away to give us access.

Sydney's eyes flicked toward the car, where Victor, Robert, and Dimitri were waiting. "What about them?" she asked me.

I hesitated. I wanted Dimitri to be with me to drop the bombshell, but Emily might only be able to handle one thing at a time here. Moroi didn't have to run in royal circles to know who Victor Dashkov was or what he looked like. Our trip to Las Vegas had been proof of that. I shook my head at Sydney. "They can wait."

We settled into the family's living room and learned the guy who'd answered the door was Emily's husband, John Mastrano. Emily went through the motions of offering us beverages, like this was a perfectly ordinary visit,

but the look on her face confirmed she was still in shock. She handed us glasses of water like a robot, her face so pale she might have been Strigoi.

John rested his hand on Emily's once she sat down. He kept giving us wary looks, but for her, he was all affection and concern. "What's going on?"

Emily's eyes were still dazed. "I . . . don't know. My cousin is here . . . but I don't understand how . . ." She looked back and forth at me, Sydney, and Sonya. "How is this possible?" Her voice shook.

"It was Lissa, wasn't it?" exclaimed Jill, who undoubtedly knew this relative's sordid history. She was understandably shocked—and a little nervous—but excitement was beginning to stir. "I heard what happened with Dimitri. It's true, isn't it? Lissa can heal Strigoi. She saved him. She saved . . ." Jill turned toward Sonya, enthusiasm wavering a little. I wondered what kind of stories she'd heard about Sonya. "She saved you."

"Lissa didn't do it," I said. "Another, uh, spirit user did."

Jill's face lit up. "Adrian?" I'd forgotten about her crush on him.

"No . . . someone else. It's not important," I added hastily. "Sonya's . . . well, she's Moroi again. Confused, though. Not quite herself."

Sonya had been drinking in the sight of her cousin but now turned to me with a wry, knowing smile. "I can speak for myself, Rose."

"Sorry," I said.

Emily turned to Sydney and frowned. They'd been introduced, but no more. "Why are you here?" Emily didn't have to say what she really meant. She wanted to know why a *human* was here. "Are you a feeder?"

"No!" exclaimed Sydney, jumping up from her spot beside me on the loveseat. I had never seen her filled with such outrage and disgust. "Say that again, and I'll walk right out of here! I'm an Alchemist."

She was met with blank stares, and I pulled Sydney back down. "Easy, girl. I don't think they don't know what Alchemists are." Secretly, I was glad. When I'd first discovered the Alchemists, I'd felt like I was the last person in the world to find out. It was nice to know others were out of the loop too. Keeping things simple for now, I explained to Emily, "Sydney's been helping us."

Tears brimmed in Emily's blue eyes as she turned back to her cousin. Emily Mastrano was one of the most stunning women I'd ever met. Even tears were beautiful on her. "It's really you, isn't it? They brought you back to me. Oh God." Emily rose and walked over to hold her cousin in a deep embrace. "I've missed you so much. I can't believe this."

I almost felt like crying, too, but sternly reminded myself that we had come with a mission. I knew how startling this all was. We had just turned the Mastrano family's world upside down . . . and I was about to complicate things even more. I hated to do it. I wished they could have the time they needed to adjust, to celebrate the miracle of having Sonya back. But the clock at Court—and on my life—was ticking.

"We brought her . . ." I said at last. "But there's another reason we're here."

I don't know what tone my voice conveyed, but Emily stiffened and stepped back from Sonya, sitting down beside her husband. Somehow, in that moment, I think she knew why we were here. I could see in her eyes that she was afraid—as if she'd been dreading this type of visit for years, as if she'd imagined it a hundred times.

I pushed forward. "We know . . . we know about Eric Dragomir."

"No," said Emily, her voice an odd mixture of harshness and desperateness. Her obstinate manner was remarkably similar to Sonya's initial refusal to aid us. "No. We are not doing this."

The instant I'd seen Jill, the instant I'd recognized those eyes, I'd known we had the right place. Emily's words—more importantly, her lack of a denial—confirmed it.

"We have to," I said. "This is serious."

Emily turned to Sonya. "You promised! You promised you wouldn't tell!"

"I didn't," said Sonya, but her face wore its earlier doubt.

"She didn't," I said firmly, hoping to reassure them both. "It's hard to explain . . . but she kept her promise."

"No," repeated Emily. "This isn't happening. We cannot talk about this."

"What . . . what's going on?" demanded John. Anger kindled in his eyes. He didn't like seeing strangers upset his wife.

I directed my words to Emily. "We *have* to talk about this. Please. We need your help. We need *her* help." I gestured to Jill.

"What do you mean?" asked Jill. That earlier eager spark was gone, cooled by her mother's reaction.

"It's about your—" I came to a stop. I'd rushed into this, ready to find Lissa's sibling—her sister, we now knew—with little thought of the implications. I should have known this would be a secret from everyone—including the child in question. I hadn't considered what a shock this would be to her. And this wasn't just some random stranger. This was *Jill.* Jill. My friend. The girl who was like a little sister to all of us, the one we looked out for. What was I about to do to her? Looking at John, I realized things were worse still. Did Jill think he was her father? This family was about to be shaken to its core—and I was responsible.

"Don't!" cried Emily, jumping up again. "Get out! All of you! I don't want you here!"

"Mrs. Mastrano . . ." I began. "You can't pretend this isn't real. You have to face it."

"*No!*" she pointed to the door. "Get out! Get out, or I'll . . . I'll call the police! Or the guardians! You . . ." Realization flashed over her now that the initial shock of seeing Sonya had faded. Victor wasn't the only criminal Moroi would be on guard for. "You're a fugitive! A murderer!"

"She is not!" said Jill, leaning forward. "I told you, Mom. I told you before it was a mistake—"

"Get out," repeated Emily.

"Sending us away won't change the truth," I said, forcing myself to stay calm.

"Will someone please tell me what the *hell* is going on?" John's face was flushed red, angry and defensive. "If I don't have an answer within thirty seconds, I'm calling the guardians *and* the police."

I looked over at Jill and couldn't speak. I didn't know how to say what I needed to, at least not tactfully. Sydney, however, didn't have that problem.

"He's not your father," she said bluntly, pointing at John.

There was a slight pause in the room. Jill almost looked disappointed, like

she'd hoped for more exciting news.

"I know that. He's my stepdad. Or, well, my dad as far as I'm concerned."

Emily sank back on the couch, burying her face in her hands. She seemed to be crying, but I was pretty sure she could jump up at any moment and call the authorities. We had to get through this fast, no matter how painful.

"Right. He's not your biological father," I said, looking steadily at Jill. *The eyes. How had I never noticed the eyes?* "Eric Dragomir is."

Emily made a low keening sound. "No," she begged. "Please don't do this."

John's anger morphed back to the confusion that seemed to be so in fashion in this room. "*What?*"

"That . . . no." Jill slowly shook her head. "That's impossible. My father was just . . . just some guy who ran out on us."

In some ways, that wasn't far from the truth, I supposed. "It was Eric Dragomir," I said. "You're part of their family. Lissa's sister. You're . . ." I startled myself, realizing I had to look at Jill in a whole new way. "You're royalty."

Jill was always full of energy and optimism, operating in the world with a naive hope and charm. But now her face was grim and sober, making her look older than her fifteen years. "No. This is a joke. My dad was a lowlife. I'm not . . . no. Rose, stop."

"Emily." I flinched at the sound of Sonya's voice, surprised to hear her speak. I was more surprised at her expression. Authoritative. Serious. Determined. Sonya was younger than Emily by—what? Ten years, if I had to guess. But Sonya had fixed her cousin with a stare that made Emily look like a naughty child. "Emily, it's time to give this up. You have to tell her. For God's sake, you have to tell John. You can't keep this buried anymore."

Emily looked up and met Sonya's eyes. "I can't tell. You know what will happen . . . I can't do that to her."

"None of us know what will happen," said Sonya. "But things will get worse if you don't take control now."

After a long moment, Emily finally looked away, staring at the floor. The sad, sad look on her face broke my heart. And not just mine.

"Mom?" asked Jill, voice trembling. "What's happening? This is all a big mix-up, right?"

Emily sighed and looked up at her daughter. "No. You are Eric Dragomir's daughter. Rose is right." John made a small, strangled sound but didn't interrupt his wife. She squeezed his hand again. "What I told you both over the years . . . it was true. Mostly. We did just have a brief . . . relationship. Not a cheap one, exactly. But brief." She paused and glanced over at John this time, her expression softening. "I told you . . ."

He nodded. "And I told *you* the past didn't matter to me. Never affected how I felt about you, about Jill. But I never imagined . . ."

"Me neither," she agreed. "I didn't even know who he was when we first met. It was back when I lived in Las Vegas and had my first job, dancing in a show at the Witching Hour."

I felt my eyes go wide. No one seemed to notice. *The Witching Hour*. My friends and I had been to that casino while hunting for Robert, and a man there had made a joke about Lissa's father being interested in showgirls. I

knew Emily worked in a Detroit ballet company now; it was why they lived in Michigan. Never would I have guessed that she'd started as a feather-and-sequin-clad dancer in a Las Vegas show. But why not? She would have had to start somewhere, and her tall, graceful frame would lend itself well to any type of dancing.

"He was so sweet . . . and so sad," Emily continued. "His father had just died, and he'd come to sort of drown his sorrows. I understood how a death would devastate him, but now . . . well, I *really* understand. It was another loss to his family. The numbers were dropping." She frowned thoughtfully and then shrugged. "He was a good man, and I think he truly loved his wife. But he was in a dark, low place. I don't think he was using me. He cared about me, though I doubt what happened between us would have in other circumstances. Anyway, I was fine with the way things ended and was content to move on with my life . . . until Jill came along. I contacted Eric because I thought he should know—though I made it clear I didn't expect anything from him. And at that point, knowing who he was, I didn't *want* anything. If I'd let him, I think he would have acknowledged you, had a role in your life." Emily's eyes were on Jill now. "But I've seen what that world is like. Court life is politics and lies and backstabbing. In the end, the only thing I'd accept from him was money. I still didn't want that. I didn't want to feel like I was blackmailing him—but I *did* want to make sure your future was secure."

I spoke without thinking. "You don't really live like you're using that money." I regretted the words as soon as they were out. Their home was perfectly nice, hardly the depths of poverty. But it also didn't match the funds I'd seen moved around in those bank accounts.

"I'm not," said Emily. "It's on hand for emergencies, of course, but mostly I set it all aside for Jill, for her future. To do whatever she wants."

"What do you mean?" asked Jill, aghast. "What kind of money are you talking about?"

"You're an heiress," I said. "*And* royalty."

"I'm not any of those things," she said. She was frantic now, looking around at all of us. She reminded me of a deer, ready to bolt. "There's a mistake. You've all made some mistake."

Emily stood up and walked over to Jill's chair, kneeling on the floor before it. Emily clasped her daughter's hand. "It *is* all true. And I'm sorry you have to find out like this. But it doesn't change anything. Our lives aren't going to change. We'll go on just like we have before."

A range of emotions raced over Jill's features—especially fear and confusion—but she leaned down and buried her face against her mother's shoulder in acceptance. "Okay."

It was a touching moment, and again, I almost felt like crying. I'd had my own share of family drama and parental issues. Like before, I wanted the Mastranos to have this moment—but they couldn't.

"You can't," I told them. "You can't go on like before. Jill . . . Jill has to go to Court."

Emily jerked away from Jill and stared at me. Only a second ago, Emily had been full of grief and distress. Now, I saw intense anger and ferocity. Her blue eyes were stormy, fixing me with a sharp glare. "*No*. She is not going there.

She is never going there."

Jill had already visited Court before, but both Emily and I knew that I wasn't referring to some casual sightseeing trip. Jill had to go with her true identity. Well—maybe *true* wasn't the right word. Illicit royalty wasn't part of her nature, at least not yet. She was who she'd always been, but her name had changed. That change had to be acknowledged, and the Moroi Court would be shaken.

"She has to," I urged. "The Court's getting corrupted, and the Dragomir family has to play its part to help fix things. Lissa has no power alone, not without a family quorum. All the other royals . . . they're trampling her. They're going to push laws that won't help any of us."

Emily still knelt by the chair, as though shielding Jill from my words. "And that's exactly why Jill can't go. It's why I wouldn't let Eric acknowledge her. I don't want Jill involved. That place is poison. Tatiana's murder is proof." Emily paused and gave me a sharp look, reminding me that I was the chief suspect. Apparently we weren't past that yet. "All those royals . . . they're vicious. I don't want Jill turning into one of them. I *won't* let her turn into one of them."

"Not all royals are like that," I argued. "Lissa's not. She's trying to change the system."

Emily gave me a bitter smile. "And how do you think the others feel about her reform? I'm sure there are royals who are happy to see her silenced—royals who wouldn't like to see her family reemerge. I told you: Eric was a good man. Sometimes I don't think it's a coincidence their family has died out."

I gaped. "That's ridiculous." But I suddenly wasn't so sure.

"Is it?" Emily's eyes were on me, as though guessing my doubts. "What do you think they'd do if another Dragomir came forward? The people who oppose Vasilisa? What do you think they'd do if only one person stood between them and her family's power?"

Her implications were shocking . . . yet, I knew they weren't impossible. Glancing over at Jill, I felt an empty, sinking feeling in my stomach. What would I be subjecting her to? Sweet, innocent Jill. Jill wanted adventure out of life and could still barely talk to guys without blushing. Her desire to learn to fight was half-youthful impulse and half-instinct to defend her people. Stepping into the royal world could technically help her people too—though not in a way she'd ever expected. And it would mean getting involved with the dark and sinister nature that sometimes filled the Court.

Emily seemed to read my silence as agreement. A mix of triumph and relief crossed her face, all of which vanished when Jill suddenly spoke up.

"I'll do it."

We all turned to stare. Thus far, I'd been regarding her with pity, thinking of her as a victim. Now, I was startled at how brave and resolved she looked. Her expression was still underscored with a little fear and shock, but there was a steel in her I'd never seen before.

"What?" exclaimed Emily.

"I'll do it," said Jill, voice steadier. "I'll help Lissa and . . . and the Dragomirs. I'll go with Rose back to Court."

I decided mentioning the myriad difficulties of me getting anywhere near

Court wasn't important just then. Honestly, I had reached a point where I was playing all of this by ear, though it was a relief to see Emily's fury shifted away from me.

"You will not! I'm not letting you near there."

"You can't make this choice for me!" cried Jill. "I'm not a child."

"And you're certainly not an adult," retorted Emily.

The two began arguing back and forth, and soon John jumped in to support his wife. In the midst of the family bickering, Sydney leaned toward me and murmured, "I bet you never thought the hardest part of finding your 'savior' would be getting her mom to let her stay out past curfew."

The unfortunate part about her joke was that it was kind of true. We needed Jill, and I certainly hadn't envisioned this complication. What if Emily refused? Clearly, keeping Jill's heritage a secret was something she'd been pretty adamant about for a while—say, like, fifteen years. I had a feeling Jill wouldn't be beyond running away to Court if it came down to that. And I wouldn't be beyond helping her.

Once more, Sonya jumped into the conversation unexpectedly. "Emily, didn't you hear me? This is all going to happen eventually, with or without your consent. If you don't let Jill go now, she'll go next week. Or next year. Or in five years. The point is, it *will* happen."

Emily sank back against the chair, face crumpling. "No. I don't want this."

Sonya's pretty face turned bitter. "Life, unfortunately, doesn't seem to care what we want. Act now while you can actually stop it from being a disaster."

"Please, Mom," begged Jill. Her jade Dragomir eyes regarded Emily with affection. I knew Jill might indeed disobey and run off—but she didn't want to, not if she didn't have to.

Emily stared into the distance, long-lashed eyes vacant and defeated. And although she was standing in the way of my plans, I knew she did it out of legitimate love and concern—traits that had probably drawn Eric to her.

"Okay," said Emily at last. She sighed. "Jill can go—but I'm going too. You aren't facing that place without me."

"Or me," said John. He still seemed bewildered but was determined to support his wife and stepdaughter. Jill regarded them both with gratitude, reminding me again that I'd just turned a functional family dysfunctional. Emily and John coming with us hadn't been part of my plans, but I couldn't blame them and didn't see what harm they'd cause. We'd need Emily anyway to tell everyone about Eric.

"Thank you," I said. "Thank you so much."

John eyed me. "We still haven't dealt with the fact that there's a fugitive in our home."

"Rose didn't do it!" That fierceness was still in Jill. "It was a setup."

"It was." I hesitated to speak my next words. "Probably by the people opposing Lissa."

Emily paled, but I felt the need for honesty, even if it reaffirmed her fears. She took a steadying breath. "I believe you. Believe that you didn't do it. I don't know why . . . but I do." She almost smiled. "No, I do know why. It's because of what I said before, about those vipers at Court. They're the ones who do this kind of thing. Not you."

"Are you sure?" asked John uneasily. "This mess with Jill is bad enough without us housing a criminal."

"I'm certain," said Emily. "Sonya and Jill trust Rose, and so I do. You're all welcome to stay here tonight since we can hardly head out to Court right now."

I opened my mouth to say we most certainly could leave right now, but Sydney elbowed me sharply. "Thank you, Mrs. Mastrano," she said, summoning up that Alchemist diplomacy. "That would be great."

I repressed a scowl. Time was still pressing on me, but I knew the Mastranos were entitled to make some preparations. It was probably better to travel in the daytime too. A rough check of my mental map made me think we could do the whole drive back to Court in one day. I nodded in agreement with Sydney, resigning myself to a sleepover at the Mastrano house.

"Thanks. We appreciate it." Suddenly, something occurred to me, summoning back John's words. *This mess with Jill is bad enough without us housing a criminal.* I gave Emily as convincing and reassuring a smile as I could muster. "We, um, also have some friends with us waiting out in the car . . ."

TWENTY-FOUR

CONSIDERING THEIR EARLIER antagonism, I was a bit surprised to see Sonya and Robert combine their powers to create an illusion for the Dashkov brothers. It obscured their appearances, and with the addition of some fake names, the Mastrano family just assumed the guys were part of our increasingly bizarre entourage. Considering the distress and upheaval already going on in the house, a couple more people seemed the least of the Mastranos' worries.

In playing good Moroi hosts, it wasn't enough to just cook up dinner. Emily also managed to get a feeder to come by—a sort of "blood delivery service." Normally, Moroi who lived outside sheltered areas and intermingled among humans had access to secret feeders living nearby. Usually, these feeders had a keeper of sorts, a Moroi who made money off the service. It was common for Moroi to simply show up at the home of the feeder's "owner," but in this case, Emily had made arrangements for the feeder to be brought to her house.

She was doing it as a courtesy, the kind she'd do for any Moroi guests—even ones who were delivering news she'd dreaded receiving for most of her life. Little did she know just how desperately welcome blood was to the Moroi we'd brought along. I didn't mind the brothers suffering a little weakness, but Sonya definitely needed blood if she was going to continue her recovery.

Indeed, when the feeder and her keeper showed, Sonya was the first to drink. Dimitri and I had to stay out of sight upstairs. Sonya and Robert could only manage so much spirit-illusion, and hiding Robert and Victor's identities from the feeder's Moroi was imperative. Obscuring both me and Dimitri would have been too much, and considering our most-wanted status, it was essential we not take any risks.

Leaving the brothers unsupervised made Dimitri and me nervous, but the two of them seemed too desperate for blood to attempt anything. Dimitri and I wanted to clean up anyways, since we hadn't had time for showers this morning. We flipped a coin, and I got to go first. Only, when I finished and was rummaging through my clothes, I discovered I'd gone through my clean "casual wear" supply and was down to the dress Sydney had included in the backpack. I grimaced but figured it wouldn't hurt to put the dress on for one night. We wouldn't be doing much more than waiting around for tomorrow's departure, and maybe Emily would let me do laundry before we left. After decent hair styling with a blow dryer, I finally felt civilized again.

Sydney and I had been given a guestroom to share, and the brothers

occupied another. Sonya was going to stay in Jill's room, and Dimitri had been offered the couch. I didn't doubt for a second he'd be stalking the halls as the household slept and that I'd be trading shifts with him. For now, he was still showering, and I crept out into the hall and peered down over a railing to check out the first floor. The Mastranos, Sonya, and the brothers were all gathered with the feeder and her keeper. Nothing seemed amiss. Relieved, I returned to my room and used the downtime to check on Lissa.

After the initial excitement of passing her test, I'd felt her calm down and had assumed she was getting much-needed sleep. But, no. She hadn't gone to bed. She'd taken Eddie and Christian over to Adrian's, and I realized she was the one who'd woken him up from the dream I'd shared with him in the car. A skimming of her recent memories gave me a replay of what had happened since the time he left me and staggered to his door.

"What's going on?" he asked, looking from face to face. "I was having a good dream."

"I need you," said Lissa.

"I hear that from women a lot," said Adrian. Christian made a gagging sound, but the faintest glimmer of a smile crossed Eddie's lips, despite his otherwise tough guardian-stance.

"I'm serious," she told him. "I just got a message from Ambrose. He's got something important to tell us, and . . . I don't know. I'm still not certain of his role in everything. I want another set of eyes on him. I want your opinion."

"That," Adrian said, "is *not* something I hear a lot."

"Just hurry up and get dressed, okay?" ordered Christian.

Honestly, it was a wonder anyone slept anymore, considering how often we were all pulled out of sleep. Adrian nonetheless did dress quickly, and despite his flippant comments, I knew he was interested in anything related to clearing my name. What I was uncertain of was whether he'd tell anyone about the mess I'd gotten myself into, now that I'd slipped and revealed some of my true activities.

My friends hurried over to the building they'd visited before, the one where Ambrose lived and worked. The Court had woken up, and people were out and about, many undoubtedly wanting to find out about the second monarch test. In fact, a few people catching sight of Lissa called out happy greetings.

"I had another trial tonight," Lissa told Adrian. Someone had just congratulated her. "An unexpected one."

Adrian hesitated, and I waited for him to say he'd already heard that from me. I also waited for him to deliver the shocking news about my current company and whereabouts. "How'd it go?" he asked instead.

"I passed," she replied. "That's all that matters."

She couldn't bring herself to tell him about the cheering people, those who didn't just simply support her because of the law but because they actually believed in her. Tasha, Mia, and some surprise friends from school had been among the onlookers, grinning at her. Even Daniella, there to wait for Rufus's turn, had grudgingly congratulated Lissa, seeming surprised Lissa had made it through. The whole experience had been surreal, and Lissa had simply wanted to get out of there.

Eddie had gotten pulled away to assist other guardians, despite his protests

that he was Lissa's escort. So, Christian and Tasha had ended up having to take Lissa home alone. Well, almost alone. A guardian named Ethan Moore joined them, the one Abe had teased Tasha about. Abe exaggerated some things, but he'd been right this time. Ethan looked as tough as any guardian, but his kickass attitude occasionally faltered whenever he looked at Tasha. He adored her. She clearly liked him too and flirted along the way—much to Christian's discomfort. I thought it was cute. Some guys probably wouldn't go near Tasha because of her scars. It was nice to see someone who appreciated her for her character, no matter how disgusted Christian was by the thought of *anyone* dating his aunt. And I actually kind of liked seeing Christian so obviously tormented. It was good for him.

Ethan and Tasha left once Lissa was securely back in her room. Within minutes, Eddie showed back up, grumbling about how they'd delayed him with some "crap task" when they knew he had better things to do. He'd apparently made such a fuss that they'd finally released him, so he could hurry back to Lissa's side. He made it just ten minutes before Ambrose's note arrived, which was lucky timing. Eddie would have freaked out if he'd come to her room and found her gone. He would have thought Strigoi had kidnapped his charge in his absence.

That was the series of events leading up to what was happening now: Lissa and the three guys going off to Ambrose's secret meeting.

"You're early," he said, letting them in before Lissa could even knock a second time. They stood inside Ambrose's own room now, not a fancy parlor for clients. It resembled a dorm room—a very nice one. Much nicer than anything I'd endured. Lissa's attention was all on Ambrose, so she didn't notice, out of the corner of her eye, Eddie quickly scanning the room. I was glad he was on his game and guessed he didn't trust Ambrose—or anyone not in our immediate circle.

"What's going on?" asked Lissa, as soon as Ambrose shut the door. "Why the urgent visit?"

"Because I have to show you something," he said. On his bed was a pile of papers, and he took the top one. "Remember when I said they were locking off Tatiana's belongings? Well now they're inventorying and removing them." Adrian shifted uncomfortably—again, only something I noticed. "She had a safe where she kept important documents—secret ones, obviously. And . . ."

"And?" prompted Lissa.

"And, I didn't want anyone to find them," Ambrose continued. "I didn't know what most of them were, but if she wanted them secret . . . I just felt they should stay that way. I knew the combination, and so . . . I stole them." Guilt shone on his face, but it wasn't murderous guilt. It was guilt for the theft.

Lissa eyed the stack eagerly. "And?"

"None of them have anything to do with what you're looking for . . . except maybe this one." He handed her the piece of paper. Adrian and Christian crowded around her.

Darling Tatiana,

I'm a bit surprised to see how these latest developments have unfolded. I thought we had an understanding that the safety of our people required more than just bringing in a younger crop of guardians. We have let too many of them go to waste,

particularly the women. If you took actions to force them back—and you know what I'm talking about—the guardian ranks would swell. This current law is completely inadequate, particularly after seeing how your "training" experiment failed.

I'm equally shocked to hear that you are considering releasing Dimitri Belikov from his guards. I don't understand exactly what happened, but you cannot trust mere appearances. You may be unleashing a monster—or at the very least, a spy—in our midst, and he needs to be under much stricter guard than he currently is. In fact, your continued support of the study of spirit is troubling altogether and no doubt led to this unnatural situation. I believe there is a reason this element was lost to us for so long: our ancestors realized its danger and stamped it out. Avery Lazar stands as proof of that, and your prodigy, Vasilisa Dragomir, is certain to follow. In encouraging Vasilisa, you encourage the degradation of the Dragomir line, a line that should be allowed to fade into history with honor and not the disgrace of insanity. Your support of her may also put your own great-nephew at risk, something neither of us would like to see happen.

I'm sorry to burden you with so much condemnation. I hold you in the highest regard and have nothing but respect for the way you have so skillfully governed our people these long years. I'm certain you will soon come to the appropriate decisions—though I worry others may not share my confidence in you. Said people might attempt to take matters into their own hands, and I fear for what may follow.

The letter was typed, with no signature. For a moment, Lissa couldn't process it as a whole. She was completely consumed by the part about the Dragomir line fading into disgrace. It hit too close to the vision she'd seen in the test.

It was Christian who pulled her back. "Well. It would seem Tatiana had enemies. But I guess that's kind of obvious at this point in the game."

"Who's this from?" demanded Adrian. His face was dark, furious at this thinly veiled threat to his aunt.

"I don't know," said Ambrose. "This is exactly the way I found it. Maybe she didn't even know who the sender was."

Lissa nodded her agreement. "There's certainly an anonymous feel to it . . . and yet, at the same time, I feel like it's someone Tatiana must have known well."

Adrian gave Ambrose a suspicious look. "How do we know you didn't just type this yourself to throw us off?"

"Adrian," chastised Lissa. She didn't say it but was hoping to urge Adrian to feel out Ambrose's aura for anything she might not be able to detect.

"This is crazy," said Christian, tapping the piece of paper. "The part about rounding up dhampirs and forcing them to be guardians. What do you think that means—the "actions" that Tatiana knows about?"

I knew because I'd been tipped off about a lot of this earlier. Compulsion, Tatiana's note had said.

"I'm not sure," said Lissa. She reread the letter to herself. "What about the ‘experiments' part? Do you think that's the training sessions Grant did with Moroi?"

"That was what I thought," said Ambrose. "But I'm not sure."

"Can we see the rest?" asked Adrian, gesturing to the stack of papers. I

couldn't tell if his suspicion was legitimate distrust of Ambrose or just the result of how upset his aunt's murder made him.

Ambrose handed over the papers, but after going through the pages, Lissa agreed: there was nothing of use in them. The documents mostly consisted of legalese and personal correspondence. It occurred to Lissa—as it had to me—that Ambrose might not be showing everything he'd found. There was no way to prove that for now. Stifling a yawn, she thanked him and left with the others.

She was hoping for sleep, but her mind couldn't help but analyze the letter's possibilities. If it was legitimate.

"That letter's evidence that someone had a lot more reason to be pissed off at Tatiana than Rose did," observed Christian as they wound their way back upstairs toward the building's exit. "Aunt Tasha once said that anger based on calculated reason is more dangerous than anger based on blind hate."

"Your aunt's a regular philosopher," said Adrian wearily. "But everything we've got is still circumstantial."

Ambrose had let Lissa keep the letter, and she'd folded it and put it in her jeans pocket. "I'm curious what Tasha will have to say about this. And Abe too." She sighed. "I wish Grant was still alive. He was a good man—and might have some insight into this."

They reached a side exit on the main floor, and Eddie pushed the door open for them. Christian glanced over at Lissa as they stepped outside. "How close were Grant and Serena—"

Eddie moved a fraction of a second before Lissa saw the problem, but of course, Eddie would have already been watching for problems. A man—a Moroi, actually—had been waiting among trees in the courtyard that separated Ambrose's building from the neighboring one. It wasn't exactly a secluded spot, but it was far enough off of the main paths that it often stayed deserted.

The man moved forward and looked startled when he saw Eddie racing toward him. I was able to analyze the fight in a way Lissa couldn't. Judging by the man's angle and movement, he'd been heading for Lissa—with a knife in his hand. Lissa froze in fear, an expected reaction for someone not trained to react in this situation. But when Christian jerked her back, she came to life and quickly retreated with him and Adrian.

The attacker and Eddie were deadlocked for a moment, each trying to take the other down. I heard Lissa yell for help, but my attention was all on the fighters. The guy was strong for a Moroi and his maneuvers suggested he'd been trained to fight. I doubted, however, that he'd been trained since elementary school, nor did he have the muscle a dhampir did.

Sure enough, Eddie broke through and forced the guy to the ground. Eddie reached out to pin the man's right hand and get the knife out of the equation. Moroi or not, the man was actually quite skilled with the blade, particularly when I (and probably Eddie too) noticed scarring and what looked like a bent finger on his left hand. The guy had probably gone to great extents to hone his knife-hand's reflexes. Even restrained, he was still able to snake up with the blade, aiming unhesitatingly for Eddie's neck. Eddie was too fast to let that happen and blocked the blow with his arm, which took the blade's cut. Eddie's

block gave the Moroi a bit more room to move, and he bucked up, throwing Eddie off. Without missing a beat—really, this guy was impressive—the Moroi swung for Eddie again. There could be no doubt about the man's intentions. He wasn't holding back. He was there to kill. That blade was out for blood. Guardians knew how to subdue and take prisoners, but we'd also been trained that when things were moving too fast, when it was an us-or-them situation—well, we made sure it was them. Eddie was faster than his opponent and was being driven by instincts pounded into us for years: stop what was trying to kill you. Eddie had no gun or knife, not at Court. When the man came at him a second time, knife again pointed straight at Eddie's neck, Eddie used the only weapon left that he could be sure would save his life.

Eddie staked the Moroi.

Dimitri had once jokingly commented that you didn't have to be Strigoi to be hurt by a stake through your heart. And, let's face it, a stake through the heart didn't actually hurt. It killed. Tatiana was proof. The man's knife actually made contact with Eddie's neck—and then fell before piercing skin. The man's eyes went wide in shock and pain and then saw nothing at all. He was dead. Eddie leaned back on his heels, staring at his victim with the adrenaline-charged battle lust that followed any situation. Shouting suddenly caught his attention, and he leapt to his feet, ready for the next threat.

What he found was a group of guardians, ones who had responded to Lissa's earlier cries for help. They took one look at the scene and immediately acted on and the conclusions their training drove them to. There was a dead Moroi and someone holding a bloody weapon. The guardians went for Eddie, throwing him against the wall and prying his stake away. Lissa shouted to them that they had it all wrong, that Eddie had saved her life and—

"Rose!"

Dimitri's frantic voice shocked me back to the Mastrano house. I was sitting on the bed, and he knelt before me, face full of fear as he gripped my shoulders. "Rose, what's wrong? Are you okay?"

"No!"

I pushed him aside and moved toward the door. "I have to—I have to go back to Court. Now. Lissa's in danger. She needs me."

"Rose. *Roza.* Slow down." He'd caught hold of my arm, and there was no escaping from that grip. He turned me so I faced him. His hair was still damp from the shower, and the clean scent of soap and wet skin surrounded us. "Tell me what happened."

I quickly repeated what I'd seen. "Someone tried to kill her, Dimitri! And I wasn't there!"

"But Eddie was," said Dimitri quietly. "She's okay. She's alive." He released me, and I leaned wearily against the wall. My heart was racing, and even though my friends were safe, I couldn't shake my panic.

"And now he's in trouble. Those guardians were pissed—"

"Only because they don't know the whole story. They see a dead body and a weapon, that's it. Once they get facts and testimonies, everything will be okay. Eddie saved a Moroi. It's his job."

"But he killed another Moroi to do it," I pointed out. "We're not supposed to do that." It sounded like an obvious—and even stupid—statement, but I knew

Dimitri understood what I meant. The guardians' purpose was to protect Moroi. *They come first*. Killing one was unimaginable. But then, so was them trying to kill each other.

"This wasn't a normal situation," Dimitri affirmed.

I tipped my head back. "I know, I know. I just can't stand leaving her undefended. I want so badly to go back and keep her safe. Right now." Tomorrow seemed years away. "What if it happens again?"

"Other people are there to protect her." Dimitri walked over to me, and I was surprised to see a smile on his lips, in light of the grim events. "Believe me, I want to protect her too, but we'd risk our lives for nothing if we take off right now. Wait a little longer and at least risk your life for something important."

A little of the panic faded. "And Jill is important, isn't she?"

"Very."

I straightened up. Part of my brain kept trying to calm me about Lissa's attack while the other fully processed what we'd accomplished here. "We did it," I said, feeling a smile slowly spread to my own lips. "Against all reason . . . somehow, we found Lissa's lost sister. Do you realize what this means? Lissa can have everything she's entitled to now. They can't deny her anything. Hell, she *could* be queen if she wanted. And Jill . . ." I hesitated. "Well, she's part of an ancient royal family. That's got to be a good thing, right?"

"I think it depends on Jill," said Dimitri. "And what the after-effects of all this are."

Guilt over potentially ruining Jill's life returned, and I stared down at my feet. "Hey, it's okay," he said, tilting my chin back up. His brown eyes were warm and affectionate. "You did the right thing. No one else would have tried something this impossible. Only Rose Hathaway. You took a gamble to find Jill. You risked your life by breaking Abe's rules—and it paid off. It was worth it."

"I hope Adrian thinks so," I mused. "He thinks me leaving our ‘safe house' was the stupidest thing ever."

Dimitri's hand dropped. "You told him about all this?"

"Not about Jill. But I accidentally told him we weren't in West Virginia anymore. He's kept it secret, though," I added hastily. "No one else knows."

"I can believe that," said Dimitri, though he'd lost some of his earlier warmth. It was such a fleeting thing. "He . . . he seems pretty loyal to you."

"He is. I trust him completely."

"And he makes you happy?" Dimitri's tone wasn't harsh, but there was an intensity to it that put the exchange on par with a police interrogation.

I thought about my time with Adrian: the bantering, the parties, the games, and of course, the kissing. "Yeah. He does. I have fun with him. I mean he's infuriating sometimes—okay, a lot of the time—but don't be fooled by all the vices. He's not a bad person."

"I know he isn't," said Dimitri. "He's a good man. It's not easy for everyone to see, but I can. He's still getting himself together, but he's on his way. I saw it in the escape. And after . . ." The words caught on Dimitri's tongue. "After Siberia, he was there for you? He helped you?"

I nodded, puzzled by all these questions. Turns out they were only the

warm-up for the big one.

"Do you love him?"

There were only a few people in the world who could ask me such insanely personal questions without getting punched. Dimitri was one of them. With us, there were no walls, but our complicated relationship made this topic surreal. How could I describe loving someone else to a man I'd once loved? *A man you still love*, a voice whispered inside my head. Maybe. Probably. Again, I reminded myself that it was natural to carry lingering feelings for Dimitri. They would fade. They *had* to fade, just like his had. He was the past. Adrian was my future.

"Yeah," I said, taking longer than I probably should have. "I . . . I do love him."

"Good. I'm glad." The thing was, Dimitri's face didn't look all that glad as he stared blankly out the window. My confusion grew. Why was he upset? His actions and words no longer seemed to match lately.

I approached him. "What's wrong?

"Nothing. I just want to make sure that you're okay. That you're happy." He turned back to me, putting on a forced smile. He'd spoken the truth—but not the whole truth. "Things have been changing, that's all. It's making me reconsider so much. Ever since Donovan . . . and then Sonya . . . it's strange. I thought it all changed the night Lissa saved me. But it didn't. There's been so much more, more to the healing than I realized." He started to slip into pensive mode but caught himself. "Every day I figure out something new. Some new emotion I'd forgotten to feel. Some revelation I totally missed. Some beauty I didn't see."

"Hey, my hair in the alley does *not* go on that list, okay?" I teased. "You were in shock."

The forced smile grew natural. "No, Roza. It *was* beautiful. It's beautiful now."

"The dress is just throwing you off," I said, attempting a joke. In reality, I felt dizzy under his gaze.

Those dark, dark eyes looked at me—*really* looked at me, I think, for the first time since he'd entered the room. A mixed expression came over him that made no sense to me. I could pick out the emotions it contained but not what caused them. Awe. Wonder. Sadness. Regret.

"What?" I asked uneasily. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

He shook his head, the smile rueful now. "Because sometimes, a person can get so caught up in the details that they miss the whole. It's not just the dress or the hair. It's *you*. You're beautiful. So beautiful, it hurts me."

I felt a strange fluttering sensation in my chest. Butterflies, cardiac arrest . . . it was hard to say what exactly. Yet, in that moment, I was no longer standing in the Mastrano guestroom. He'd said those words before, or something very close. *So beautiful, it hurts me.* It was back in the cabin at St. Vladimir's, the one and only time we'd had sex. He'd looked at me in a very similar way, too, only there'd been less sadness. Nonetheless, as I heard those words again, a door I'd kept locked in my heart suddenly burst open, and with it came all the feelings and experiences and sense of oneness we'd always shared. Looking at him, just for the space of a heartbeat, I had a surreal

sensation wash over me, liked I'd known him forever. Like we were bound . . . but not in the way Lissa and I were, by a bond forced on us.

"Hey, guys, have you—oh." Sydney came to a halt in the half-open doorway and promptly took two steps back. "Sorry. I—that is—"

Dimitri and I immediately pulled back from each other. I felt warm and shaky and only then noticed how close we had been. I didn't even remember moving, but only a breath had separated us. What had happened? It was like a trance. A dream.

I swallowed and tried to slow my pulse. "No problem. What's going on?"

Sydney glanced between us, still looking uncomfortable. Her dating life might be non-existent, but even she knew what she'd walked in on. I was glad one of us did. "I . . . that is . . . I just wanted to come hang out. I can't handle *that* going on downstairs."

I attempted a smile, still utterly confused by my feelings. *Why did Dimitri look at me like that? Why did he say that? He can't still want me. He said he didn't. He told me to leave him alone.*

"Sure. We were just . . . talking," I said. She obviously didn't believe me. I tried harder to convince her . . . and myself. "We were talking about Jill. Do you have any ideas on how to get her to Court—seeing as we're all outlaws?"

Sydney might not be an expert in personal relationships, but puzzles were familiar territory. She relaxed, her attention focusing inward as she tried to figure our problem out.

"Well, you could always have her mother—"

A loud crashing from downstairs abruptly cut her off. As one, Dimitri and I sprang for the door, ready to combat whatever mess Victor and Robert had caused. We both came screeching to a halt at the top of the stairs when we heard lots of shouts for everyone to get down.

"Guardians," Dimitri said. "There are guardians raiding the house."

TWENTY-FIVE

WE COULD ALREADY HEAR footsteps thundering through the house and knew we were seconds from the army downstairs heading up to the second floor. The three of us backed away, and to my surprise, it was Sydney who reacted first.

"Get out. I'll distract them."

Her distracting them would probably just mean momentarily blocking their way until they pushed her aside, but those extra seconds could make a huge difference. Still, I couldn't stand the thought of abandoning her. Dimitri had no such reservations, particularly when we heard feet on the stairs.

"Come on!" he shouted, grabbing hold of my arm.

We raced down the hall to the farthest bedroom, Victor and Robert's. Just before we entered, I yelled back to Sydney, "Get Jill to Court!" I don't know if she heard because by the sounds of it, the guardians had reached her. Dimitri immediately opened the room's one large window and looked at me knowingly. As always, we needed no vocal communication.

He jumped out first, no doubt wanting to take the full brunt of whatever danger waited below. I immediately followed. I dropped onto the first floor's roof, slid down it, and then made the longer drop to the ground. Dimitri caught my arm, steadying my landing—but not before one of my ankles twisted slightly in on itself. It was the same one that had taken the brunt of the fall outside Donovan's, and I winced as pain shot through me, pain I then promptly ignored.

Dark figures moved toward us, emerging from evening shadows and hidden spots around the backyard. Of course. Guardians wouldn't just come busting down a door. They'd also have the place staked out. With our natural rhythm, Dimitri and I fought back-to-back against our attackers. Like usual, it was hard to incapacitate our foes without killing them. Hard, but necessary if we could manage it. I didn't want to kill my own people, people who were just doing their job to apprehend fugitives. The long dress didn't do me any favors either. My legs kept getting caught in the fabric.

"The others will be out any minute," Dimitri grunted, slamming a guardian to the ground. "We need to move—there. That gate."

I couldn't respond but followed his lead as we made our way to a door in the fence while still defending ourselves. We'd just taken out the backyard squad when more spilled from the house. We slipped through the gate, emerging onto a quiet side road flanking the Mastrano house, and ran. It soon

became clear, however, that I couldn't keep up with Dimitri. My mind could ignore the pain, but my body couldn't make my injured ankle work properly.

Without missing a beat, Dimitri slid his arm around me, helping me run and take the weight off the ankle. We turned off the road, cutting through yards that would make it more difficult—but not impossible—for them to track us.

"We can't outrun them," I said. "I'm slowing us down. You need to—"

"Do *not* say leave you," he interrupted. "We're doing this together."

Snick, snick. A flowerpot near us suddenly exploded into a pile of dirt and clay.

"They're shooting at us," I said incredulously. "They're actually shooting at us!" With so much hand-to-hand training, I always felt like guns were cheating. But when it came to hunting down a queen-killing murderer and her accomplice? Honor wasn't the issue. Results were.

Another bullet zinged by, dangerously close. "With a silencer," said Dimitri. "Even so, they'll be cautious. They don't want the neighborhood thinking it's under attack. We need cover. Fast." We might've been literally dodging bullets, but my ankle wouldn't last much longer.

He made another sharp turn, completely immersing us in suburban backyards. I couldn't look behind us, but I heard shouting voices that let me know we weren't free yet.

"There," said Dimitri.

Ahead of us was a dark house with a large glass patio reminiscent of Sonya's. The glass door was open, though a screen blocked the way inside. Dimitri tugged on its latch. Locked. But a screen was hardly a deterrent for us. Poor, trusting family. He took out his stake and slashed a long, vertical line that we hastily slipped through. Immediately, he jerked me to the side, out of view. He put a finger to his lips, holding me close to his body, shattering me in his warmth.

Seconds later, we saw guardians coming through and searching the yards. Some kept moving on in case we'd run farther. Others lingered, investigating places that made good hiding spots as the evening grew darker and darker. I glanced at the screen. The cut had been clean, not an obvious hole, but it was still something our pursuers might notice.

Sensing this as well, Dimitri carefully moved off into the living room, doing his best to avoid windows and keep out of sight. We cut through to the kitchen and found a door leading to the garage. In the garage was a red Ford Mustang.

"Two car family," he murmured. "I was hoping for that."

"Or they're out for a walk and about to come home when they notice a SWAT team in their neighborhood," I whispered.

"The guardians won't let themselves be seen." We began searching for obvious key locations. At last, I found a set hanging on the side of a cupboard and scooped them up.

"Got 'em," I said. Since I had the keys, I think Dimitri actually would have let me jump into the driver's seat. Thanks to my right ankle, however, I had to toss him the keys. The universe had a sick sense of humor.

"Will they spot us in this?" I asked, as Dimitri opened the garage door and backed out. "It's, uh, a bit flashier than our usual stolen car profile." It was also

awesome. Sydney, car geek that she was, would have loved it. I bit my lip, still guilty that we'd left her behind. I tried to push the thought out of my head for now.

"It is," agreed Dimitri. "But other cars will be driving down the street. Some guardians will still be searching the yards, and some will be guarding the Mastranos. They don't have infinite numbers. They can't watch everything at once, though they'll certainly try."

I held my breath anyway as we drove out of the subdivision. Twice, I thought I spotted stealthy figures by the side of the road, but Dimitri was right: they couldn't check every car in a busy suburban neighborhood. The darkness also obscured our faces.

Dimitri remembered the way we'd driven in because a few turns later, we were merging onto the freeway. I knew he had no destination in mind, except for *away*. With no obvious indications that we'd been followed, I shifted my body and stretched out my throbbing leg. My chest had that light, nebulous feeling you got when too much adrenaline was pumping through you.

"They turned us in, didn't they?" I asked. "Victor and Robert called us in and then took off. I should have kept watch."

"I don't know," Dimitri said. "It's possible. I saw them just before I talked to you, and everything seemed fine. They wanted to go with us to find Jill, but they knew it was only a matter of time before we turned them over to the authorities. I'm not surprised they came up with an escape plan. They could have used the feeding as a distraction to call the guardians and get rid of us."

"Crap." I sighed and pushed my hair back, wishing I had a ponytail holder. "We should've gotten rid of *them* when we had the chance. What'll happen now?"

Dimitri was silent for a few seconds. "The Mastranos will be questioned . . . extensively. Well, all of them will, really. They'll lock Sonya up for investigation, like me, and Sydney will be shipped back to the Alchemists."

"And what will they do to her?"

"I don't know. But I'm guessing her helping vampire fugitives won't go over well with her superiors."

"Crap," I repeated. Everything had fallen apart. "And what are *we* going to do?"

"Put some distance between us and those guardians. Hide somewhere. Wrap up your ankle."

I gave him a sidelong look. "Wow. You've got everything planned out."

"Not really," he said, a small frown on his face. "That's the easy stuff. What happens *after* that is going to be the hard part."

My heart sank. He was right. Provided the Mastranos weren't indicted by Moroi authorities for helping criminals, Emily now had no one forcing her to acknowledge Jill's heritage. If Sydney was being hauled back to her own people—well. She couldn't help either. I was going to have to tell someone else, I realized. The next time I made contact with Adrian, I'd have to divulge the truth so that my friends could do something about Jill. We couldn't sit on this secret any longer.

Dimitri took the next exit, and I tuned back into the world. "Hotel?" I asked.

"Not quite," he said. We were in a busy, commercial area, not far from Ann

Arbor, I thought. One of the Detroit suburbs. Restaurants and stores lined the road, and he turned us toward a twenty-four-hour superstore that promised to carry "everything." He parked and opened his door. "Stay here."

"But—"

Dimitri looked meaningfully at me, and I glanced down. I'd come away from our fight more scuffed up than I realized, and the dress had torn. My ragged appearance would attract attention, as would my limping. I nodded, and he left.

I spent the time turning over our problems, cursing myself for not having found a way to turn in the brothers once Robert had restored Sonya. I'd been bracing myself for betrayal in the form of some magical attack. I hadn't expected something as simple as a call to the guardians.

Dimitri, ever the efficient shopper, returned soon with two large bags and something slung over his shoulder. He tossed it all in the backseat, and I peered back curiously. "What's that?" It was long and cylindrical, covered in canvas.

"A tent."

"Why are we—" I groaned. "No hotel, huh?"

"We'll be harder to find at a campground. The car will especially be harder to find. We can't get rid of it quite yet, not with your foot."

"Those poor people," I said. "I hope their car insurance covers theft."

Back on the freeway, we soon left the urban sprawl, and it wasn't long before we saw advertisements for campgrounds and RV parks. Dimitri pulled over at a place called Peaceful Pines. He negotiated with the man working in the office and produced a number of crisp bills. That was another reason we couldn't get a hotel, I realized. Most required credit cards, and Sydney had had all those (in fake names, of course). We were living off cash now.

The clerk gave us directions along a gravel road that led to a spot on the opposite end of the campground. The place was busy with vacationing families, but no one paid much attention to us. Dimitri made sure to park as close to a cluster of trees as possible, in order to obscure the car and its plates. Despite my protests, he wouldn't let me help with the tent. He claimed he could do it faster without me and that I should stay off my feet. I started to argue until he began assembling the tent. My jaw dropped a little as I watched how quickly he put it together. He didn't even need the directions. It had to be some kind of record.

The tent was small and sturdy, giving us both room to sit and lie, though he had to hunch just a little when we were sitting. Once inside, I got to see the rest of his purchases. A lot of it was first aid. There was also a flashlight he propped up, a kind of makeshift lamp.

"Let me see the ankle," he ordered.

I stretched out my leg, and he pushed my dress's skirt up to my knee, fingers light against my skin. I shivered as a sense of déjà vu swept me. It seemed to be happening to me a lot lately. I thought back to all the times he had helped me with other injuries. We could have been right back in St. Vladimir's gym. He gently tested the ankle's mobility and did a little poking and prodding. His fingers never ceased to amaze me. They could break a man's neck, bandage a wound, and slide sensually across bare skin.

"I don't think it's broken," he said at last. He lifted his hands, and I noticed how warm I'd been while he touched me. "Just sprained."

"That kind of thing happens when you keep jumping off roofs," I said. Jokes were my old standby to hide discomfort. "You know, we never practiced that in our training."

He smiled and took out bandaging material, wrapping the ankle until it was supported and stabilized. After that, he produced—

"A bag of frozen peas?"

Dimitri shrugged and rested the bag on my ankle. The coolness instantly made me feel better. "Easier than buying a full bag of ice."

"You're pretty resourceful, Belikov. What else do you have stashed away?"

The rest of the bags' contents turned out to be blankets and some food. I gave him a big grin when I saw he'd gotten me sour cream potato chips and a bar of chocolate. I loved that he remembered such little details about me. My smile faded when another problem quickly popped up.

"You didn't buy any clothes, did you?"

"Clothes?" he asked, like it was a foreign word.

I gestured to my torn dress. "I can't wear this for long. What am I going to do? Make a toga out of a blanket? You're such a guy, never thinking of this stuff."

"I was thinking of injury and survival. Fresh clothing's a luxury, not a necessity."

"Not even your duster?" I asked slyly.

Dimitri froze for a moment and then swore. He'd had no need to wear his coat indoors at the Mastranos'—honestly, he didn't need to outside either—and had left it there in the ensuing fight.

"Don't worry, comrade," I teased. "Plenty more where that came from."

He spread blankets over the tent's floor and laid back on them. There was a look of woe on his face that was almost comical. Raids, bullets, criminals . . . no problem. A missing duster? Crisis. "We'll get you another one," I said. "You know, once we find Jill, clear my name, and save the world."

"Just those things, huh?" he asked, making both of us laugh. But when I stretched myself out beside him, both our faces sobered.

"What are we going to do?" I asked. Tonight's most popular question.

"Sleep," he said, clicking off the flashlight. "Tomorrow we'll get a hold of Abe or Tasha or . . . someone. We'll let them handle it and get Jill where she needs to be."

I was surprised how small my voice sounded when I spoke. "I feel like we failed. I was so happy back there. I thought we'd done the impossible, but it was for nothing. All this work for nothing."

"Nothing?" he asked in astonishment. "What we did . . . this is huge. You found Lissa's sister. Another Dragomir. I don't think you still really understand the weight of that. We had almost nothing to go on, yet you pushed forward and made it happen."

"And I lost Victor Dashkov. Again."

"Well, the thing about him is that he doesn't stay hidden for long. He's one of those people who always has to be in control. He'll have to make a move eventually and when he does—we'll get him."

The smile returned to my lips, though I knew he couldn't see it. "And I thought *I* was the optimistic one here."

"It's contagious," he replied. Then, to my surprise, his hand found mine in the dark. He laced our fingers together. "You did good, Roza. Very good. Now sleep."

We touched in no other way, but his hand held all the warmth in the world. This was hardly a perfect moment, like in the library, but our familiar connection and the understanding between us burned brighter than ever, and it felt good. Right. Natural. I didn't want to sleep. I just wanted to stay there and savor being with him. It wasn't cheating, I decided, thinking of Adrian. It was just enjoying this closeness.

Still, sleep was essential. We worked out a schedule where each of us took shifts. He would stay awake now while I rested, and I had a feeling if I didn't sleep, he wouldn't either when the shift change came. I closed my eyes, and it wasn't my heart I had to slow down this time. It was my mind, the hamster wheel that went nowhere trying to figure out what to do next. *Just get Jill to Court. Just get Jill to Court.* That was all that mattered. We'd contact someone who could reach Jill. Dimitri and I would lie low, everything would soon fix itself....

"Thank God."

I spun around, not even realizing I'd fallen into a spirit dream. I was back in Sonya's garden with all its sunshine and color, and she sat back in a chair, looking expectant.

"I was afraid you'd be up all night, watching your back," she continued.

"I would if I had my choice," I replied, strolling over to her. She wasn't quite whom I'd expected to see in my dreams, but at least I'd made contact with the outside world. I wore the black-and-white dress here, but unlike reality, it was clean and intact. "Dimitri thinks we're in a secure location—though he's awake, of course."

"Of course." There was a glimmer of amusement in her eyes, but it was brief.

"Where are you?" I asked. "Did the guardians put you in holding?"

"They didn't get me," she said smugly. "You were their priority, and a little compulsion made sure they didn't see me. I took off . . . I hated to leave Emily, though."

I empathized but was too excited at Sonya's escape. Good news, finally. "But you can get Jill to Court. You're free."

Sonya looked at me as though I'd just spoken French. "I can't get to Jill."

I frowned. "Is she under that much security?"

"Rose," said Sonya. "Jill isn't with the guardians at all. Victor and Robert took her."

TWENTY-SIX

"SHE'S WHAT?" I EXCLAIMED. The dream birds singing in the garden fell silent. "*With them*? Is that why they called the guardians?"

Sonya's calmness continued, but she frowned slightly. "Victor and Robert didn't call the guardians. Why would they?"

"Because . . . because they wanted to get rid of Dimitri and me . . ."

"Perhaps," said Sonya. "But not while they were still in the house. Victor's as wanted as you are. It was only Robert's magic that got them out."

"Then who . . ." The answer hit me. I groaned. "John and Emily. I should have known it wouldn't be that easy. They were too quick to accept fugitives into their house."

"I actually think it was just John. Emily really did seem to believe you were innocent . . . even if she didn't like why you were there. I also suspect she'd worry calling guardians would just draw more attention to Jill's identity. It wouldn't surprise me if John didn't even warn her about calling them. He probably thought he was doing everyone a favor."

"And instead, he lost his stepdaughter," I said. "But why would Victor and Robert take her? And how the hell did two old men subdue a teenage girl anyway?"

Sonya shrugged. "They're probably stronger than they seem. Compulsion also likely played a role. And as for why? Hard to say. But Victor wants power and control. Keeping the missing Dragomir with him is a good way to possess that."

I slumped against a tree. "We'll never get her to Court."

"We just have to find her," said Sonya. "Which I should be able to do once she's asleep."

"More dream-walking," I said. My hope began to rekindle. "You should go to her now. Find out—"

"I've tried. She's not asleep. And I'm willing to bet they're keeping her awake for that very reason so they can put some distance between us. I'll keep trying, though."

It wasn't ideal but was the best we could hope for right now. "And Sydney and the Mastranos?"

"Facing a lot of questions." Sonya's face fell. I knew she still felt bad about abandoning her cousin, just as I felt bad about Sydney.

I gently touched Sonya's arm. "It's okay. They'll be okay. What you did will help Jill."

She nodded. "How are we going to stay in touch? I can't always wait for you to be asleep."

Silence. Excellent point.

"Maybe we could get a cell phone today . . . God knows we've needed one. And well . . . why don't you just come to us? Where are you anyway?"

I wondered if I was making a mistake in inviting her to join us. Dimitri and I had gone to great pains to keep our location secret, and that run-in with the guardians had already been a bit closer than I would have liked. Aside from the obvious problems—imprisonment, execution, et cetera—being captured would take us out of the picture for helping Lissa. Yet, I was pretty sure Sonya was one of our allies, and at this point, she might be our only link to Jill.

I'd made a similar gamble in revealing where we were to Victor. And while he had technically helped us, that help had obviously backfired. Nonetheless, I told Sonya the name of our campground and the best directions I could. She said she'd come—I didn't know how she'd manage it but suspected she was resourceful—and would keep trying to reach Jill.

"Sonya . . ." I hesitated to speak, knowing I should just let her end the dream. We had important problems, more serious than what I was about to ask. Plus, this was personal territory. "What did you mean in the car . . . when I said I'd shared a dream with my boyfriend? You looked surprised."

Sonya studied me for a long moment, those blue eyes looking deeper into me than I would have liked. Sometimes she seemed safer in crazy mode. "Auras tell a lot, Rose, and I'm very good at reading them. Much better than your friends probably are. A spirit dream wraps your own aura in gold, which is how I knew. Your personal aura is unique to you, though it fluctuates with your feelings and soul. When people are in love, it shows. Their auras shine. When you were dreaming, yours was bright. The colors were bright . . . but not what I expected from a boyfriend. Of course, not every relationship is the same. People are at different stages. I would have brushed it off, except . . ."

"Except what?"

"Except, when you're with Dimitri, your aura's like the sun. So is his." She smiled when I simply stared in stunned silence. "You're surprised by this?"

"I . . . that is, we're over. We used to be together, but after his change, he didn't want me anymore. I moved on." Where moving on apparently meant holding hands and having close, heated moments. "That's why I'm with Adrian. I'm happy with Adrian." That last sentence sounded almost defensive. Who was I trying to convince? Her or myself?

"Behaviors and feelings rarely line up," she said, sounding very Dimitri Zen-like. "Don't take this the wrong way, but you've got some issues to work out."

Great. Therapy from a crazy woman. "Okay, let's suppose there's something to this. I only really gave up on Dimitri a couple weeks ago. It's *possible* I'm probably still holding onto some feelings." Possible? I thought about how acutely aware of his physical presence I always was in the car, the carefree harmony in the library, how good it felt to work with him in that way of ours, both so determined and almost never second-guessing the other. And only hours ago, in the guestroom . . .

Sonya had the audacity to laugh. "Possible? After only two weeks? Rose, you're wise in so many ways . . . and so young in others."

I hated being judged by my age but had no time for temper tantrums. "Okay, whatever. I've still got feelings. But not him. You didn't see him after he was changed. It was horrible. He was depressed. He said he wanted to avoid me at all costs, that he couldn't love anyone again. It wasn't until this escape madness that he even started acting like his old self."

"He and I talked about that," she said, face serious again. "About the depression. I understand it. After being Strigoi . . . doing what we did . . . you don't feel worthy of life. There's just guilt and darkness and the crushing memories of that evil." She shuddered.

"You . . . you've acted differently from him. I mean, you look so sad sometimes, but at others . . . it's like nothing happened. You're already back to your old self. Mostly. Why the difference in you two?"

"Oh, I've still got the guilt, believe me. After Robert changed me . . ." There was venom when she spoke his name. "Well, I didn't want to leave my house, my bed. I hated myself for what I'd done. I wished I'd been staked to death. Then Dimitri talked to me. . . . He said that guilt was inevitable. The fact that I can feel it proves I'm not Strigoi. But he told me I can't let that stop me from embracing life again. We've been given second chances, he and I. We can't throw them away. He also said it took him a while to realize it and that he didn't want me to make the same mistakes. He told me to embrace life and its beauty and the people I love before it was too late—even though it'd be difficult. Shaking that Strigoi past . . . it's like a weight, always pressing on me. He swore he wasn't going to let it control him anymore—which, believe me, sounds noble but is very hard to do—and that he wouldn't let his life be pointless. He'd already lost some things forever but refused to let go of the rest."

"He said all that? I . . . I'm not even sure what half of it means." *He told me to embrace life and its beauty and the people I love before it was too late*.

"Sometimes I don't either. Like I said, it's much easier said than done. Still, I think he has helped me recover more quickly than I would have on my own. I'm grateful. And as for you and your auras . . ." That small smile returned. "Well, you've got to figure it out. I don't believe in soul mates, not exactly. I think it's ridiculous to think there's only one person out there for us. What if your ‘soul mate' lives in Zimbabwe? What if he dies young? I also think ‘two souls becoming one' is ridiculous. You need to hold onto yourself. But I do believe in souls being in sync, souls that mirror each other. I see that synchronicity in auras. I can see love too. And I see all of that in his aura and in yours. Only you can choose what to do with that information—if you even believe it."

"No pressure," I muttered.

She looked like she was about to end the dream but then stopped and gave me a piercing look. "One thing to be careful of, Rose. Your auras match, but they aren't identical. Dimitri's is spiked with bits of darkness, leftover from his trauma. That darkness fades a little each day. You carry darkness too—but it's not fading."

I shivered. "Lissa. It's the darkness I'm taking from her, isn't it?"

"Yes. I don't know much about bonds, but what you're doing—even if it's helping her—is very dangerous. Spirit tears us apart, no question, but in some

ways . . . I think we spirit users are built for it a little better. Not that it's always obvious," she added wryly. "But you? No. And if you take too much, I don't know what'll happen. I'm afraid of it building and building. I'm afraid it's just going to take one spark—one catalyst—to make it explode inside you."

"What happens then?" I whispered.

She shook her head slowly. "I don't know."

With that, the dream faded.

I fell back into dreamless sleep, though my body—as if knowing it was time to take my shift—woke on its own a few hours later. Night's blackness surrounded me once more, and nearby, I could hear Dimitri's even, steady breathing and sense his warmth. Everything I'd just discussed with Sonya came pouring back to me. Too much, too much. I didn't know where to begin processing it. And no, I didn't know if I could believe it, not with what I'd seen in real life. *Behaviors and feelings rarely line up.* With a deep breath, I forced myself to be a guardian, not an emotionally distraught girl.

"Your time for sleep, comrade."

His voice came to me like light in the darkness, soft and low. "You can get more rest if you need it."

"No, I'm fine," I told him. "And remember, you're not—"

"I know, I know," he chuckled. "I'm not the general." Oh lord. We finished each other's jokes. *I do believe in souls that are in sync.* Sternly reminding myself that Sonya's visit hadn't actually been about my love life, I recounted the rest of the dream to Dimitri, describing John's betrayal and Jill's abduction. "Did I . . . did I do the right thing telling Sonya where we are?"

Several moments passed before he replied. "Yes. You're right that we need her help—and she can find Jill. The problem is, Victor and Robert have to know that too." He sighed. "And you're right that I'd better rest up for what's to come."

So, in that efficient way of his, he said no more. Soon, his breathing shifted as he fell back into sleep. It was amazing how he could do that with so little effort. Of course, that was something we'd been taught as guardians: sleep when you can because you don't know when you'll be able to again. It was a trick I'd never picked up. Staring into the darkness, I kept my senses sharp, listening for any sounds that might indicate danger.

I might not have a talent for falling asleep instantly, but I *could* keep my waking body alert while still checking in with Lissa. Jill and our escape had occupied me today, but events at Court still weighed heavily on me. Someone had tried to *kill* Lissa, and a group of guardians had just dragged off Eddie.

When I looked through her eyes, it was no surprise that I found most of my friends together. They were in a stark, intimidating room similar to the one she'd been questioned in about my escape—except it was larger. And with good reason. It was packed with all sorts of people. Adrian and Christian stood by Lissa, and I needed no aura reading to know the two guys were as uneasy as she was. Hans stood behind a table, hands pressed on it as he leaned forward and glared at everyone. Opposite Lissa, against the far wall, Eddie sat stone-faced in a chair with a guardian on either side of him. Both of his guards were tense, braced to leap into action. They thought Eddie was a threat, I realized, which was ridiculous. Yet, Hans seemed to share their opinion.

He jabbed his finger at a photograph lying on the table. Taking a step forward, Lissa saw that the picture was of the guy who'd attacked her—a picture taken after his death. His eyes were closed, his skin gone pale—but it provided a detailed look at his facial features, bland as they were.

"You killed a Moroi!" exclaimed Hans. I'd apparently tuned in to the middle of the conversation. "How is that not a problem? You're trained to protect them!"

"I did," said Eddie. He was so calm, so serious that the part of me that could still muster a sense of humor thought he was like Dimitri Junior. "I protected her. What difference does it make if the threat's Moroi or Strigoi?"

"We have no proof of any of the details of this attack," growled Hans.

"You have three witnesses!" snapped Christian. "Are you saying our reports are worthless?"

"I'm saying you're his friends, which makes your reports questionable. I would have liked to have had a guardian around to verify this."

Now Lissa's temper flared. "You did! Eddie was there."

"And there was no way you could have protected her *without* killing him?" asked Hans.

Eddie didn't answer, and I knew he was seriously considering the question, wondering if he might truly have made a mistake. At last, he shook his head. "If I hadn't killed him, he would have killed me."

Hans sighed, his eyes weary. It was easy for me to be angry at him right now, and I had to remind myself he was just doing his job. He held up the picture. "And none of you—*none* of you—have ever seen this man?"

Lissa studied the face once more, repressing a shiver. No, she hadn't recognized him during the attack and didn't recognize him now. There was really nothing remarkable about him—no notable feature you could point out. Our other friends shook their heads, but Lissa felt herself frowning.

"Yes?" asked Hans, immediately jumping on that subtle shift.

"I don't know him . . ." she said slowly. The conversation with Joe the janitor popped into her mind.

"What'd the guy look like?" she'd asked Joe.

"*Plain. Ordinary. Except the hand.*"

Lissa stared at the picture a moment longer, which just barely showed a scarred hand with a couple of bent fingers. I had also noticed it in the fight. She lifted her eyes to Hans. "I don't know him," she repeated. "But I think I know someone who does. There's a janitor . . . well, a former janitor. The one who testified about Rose. I think he's seen this guy before. They have an interesting business relationship. Mikhail was going to make sure he didn't leave Court."

Adrian did not look happy at all about having Joe brought up, seeing as it implicated his mother for bribery. "They'll have a hard time making him talk."

Hans narrowed his eyes. "Oh, if he knows something, we'll make him talk." He gave a sharp nod toward the door, and one of the guardians by Eddie moved toward it. "Find this guy. And send in our 'guests.'" The guardian nodded and left the room.

"What guests?" asked Lissa.

"Well," said Hans, "it's funny you mention Hathaway. Because we just had a

sighting of her."

Lissa stiffened, panic flashing through her. *They found Rose. But how?* Abe had assured her I was safe in that town in West Virginia.

"She and Belikov were spotted outside of Detroit, where they kidnapped a girl."

"They'd never—" Lissa stopped. "Did you say Detroit?" It was with great restraint that she didn't shoot questioning looks at Christian and Adrian.

Hans nodded, and although he gave the appearance of just passing on information, I knew he was watching for some sort of telling reaction from my friends. "They had a few other people with them. Some of them got away, but we caught one."

"Who did they kidnap?" asked Christian. His astonishment wasn't faked either. He too had thought we were safely stashed.

"Mastrano," said Hans. "Something Mastrano."

"*Jill* Mastrano?" exclaimed Lissa.

"Jailbait?" asked Adrian.

Hans clearly wasn't up to date on this nickname but didn't have a chance to question it because just then, the door opened. Three guardians entered, and with them was—Sydney.

TWENTY-SEVEN

I WOULD HAVE GAPED if I were there, both from the shock of seeing Sydney and at the sight of a human on Court grounds. Humans, actually, because there were two others with her, a man and a woman. The man was young, only a little older than Sydney, with deep brown hair and eyes. The woman was older and wore the tough, seasoned look I associated with Alberta. This woman was dark-skinned, but I could still see the golden tattoo she and the other humans had. All Alchemists.

And it was obvious these Alchemists were not happy. That older woman was putting on a good show, but her darting eyes made it clear she wanted to be somewhere—anywhere—else. Sydney and the guy didn't hide their fear at all. Sydney might have gotten used to me and Dimitri, but she and her associates had just walked into a den of evil, as far as they were probably concerned.

The Alchemists weren't alone in their discomfort. As soon as they'd entered, the guardians no longer regarded Eddie as the room's threat. Their eyes were all on the humans, scrutinizing them as though they were Strigoi. My friends seemed more curious than afraid. Lissa and I had lived among humans, but Christian and Adrian had had very little exposure, other than feeders. Seeing the Alchemists on "our turf" added an extra element of intrigue.

I was certainly astonished to see Sydney there so quickly. Or was it quickly? Hours had passed since we'd escaped Jill's house. Not enough time to drive to Court but certainly enough to fly. Sydney hadn't changed clothes since I'd last seen her, and there were shadows under her eyes. I had a feeling she'd been grilled to no end since her capture. The mystery was, why bring the Alchemists here to the meeting about Eddie killing the unknown Moroi? There were two completely different issues at stake.

Lissa was thinking the same thing. "Who are these guys?" she asked, although she had a pretty good idea who Sydney was. She'd heard enough description from me. Sydney gave Lissa a once-over, and I suspected she had guessed Lissa's identity as well.

"Alchemists," said Hans gruffly. "You know what that means?"

Lissa and my friends nodded. "What do they have to do with Eddie and that guy who attacked me?" she asked.

"Maybe something. Maybe nothing." Hans shrugged. "But I know there's something strange going on, something you're all involved in, and I need to figure out what. She"—Hans pointed at Sydney—"was with Hathaway in Detroit, and I still have trouble believing *none* of you know anything about it."

Adrian crossed his arms and leaned against the wall, the perfect picture of indifference. "Keep believing that, but I don't know *any* of these people. Don't Alchemists hate us? Why are they here?" Adrian, ironically, was the only one of my friends who knew I hadn't been in West Virginia, but you'd never tell from his demeanor.

"Because we have an escaped murderess to deal with and needed to question her accomplice in person," was Hans's crisp response.

A denial of my guilt was on Lissa's lips, but the older Alchemist jumped in first. "You have no proof that Miss Sage was an 'accomplice' to your criminal. And I still think it's ridiculous that you wouldn't let us do our *own* questioning and leave it at that."

"In any other situation, we would, Miss Stanton," replied Hans. Ice was forming between the two of them. "But this one, as you can imagine, is a bit more serious than most. Our queen was murdered."

Tension ramped up even more between the guardians and the Alchemists. Their working relationship was not a happy one, I realized. It also occurred to me that even if Sydney's superiors thought she'd committed some crime, they would never admit as much to my people—which meant Hans's paranoia wasn't entirely unfounded. When none of the Alchemists responded, Hans seemed to read this as approval to begin interrogating Sydney.

"Do you know these three?" He gestured to my friends, and Sydney shook her head. "Ever communicated with them?"

"No."

He paused, as though hoping she'd change her answer. She didn't. "Then how did you get involved with Hathaway?"

She studied him intently, fear in her brown eyes. I wasn't sure if it was because of him exactly. Really, she had a lot of things to be nervous about right now, like being here at all and the eventual punishment the Alchemists would dole out. Then, of course, there was Abe. Technically, he was the reason she had gotten ensnared in this mess. All she had to do was tell on him, say he'd blackmailed her. It'd get her off the hook—but incur his wrath. Sydney swallowed and forced a defiant look.

"I met Rose in Siberia."

"Yes, yes," said Hans. "But how did you end up helping her escape here?"

"I had nothing to do with her escaping this place!" said Sydney. It was a half-truth, I supposed. "She contacted me a few days ago and asked for help to get to a house near Detroit. She claimed she was innocent and that this would help prove it."

"The Alchemists knew by then she was a fugitive," pointed out Hans. "Everyone had orders to look out for her. You could have turned her in."

"When I first met Rose, she didn't seem like the murdering type—I mean, aside from killing Strigoi. Which isn't murder at all, really." Sydney threw in a little Alchemist disdain. It was a nice touch. "So, when she said she was innocent and could prove it, I decided to help her. I gave her a ride."

"We already asked her about this," Stanton said irritably. "And we already told you that we did. What she did was foolish—a naive lapse in judgment. It's something for us to deal with, not you. You worry about your murdering fiend." Her words were light, like they were going to take Sydney home and

chastise a naughty child. I doubted it would be that simple.

"Who were the people with her?" asked Hans, ignoring Stanton.

Sydney's contempt grew. "One was that guy . . . Dimitri Belikov. The one you think was 'cured.' I don't know who the others were. Two guys and a woman. They never introduced us." It was a well-done lie, her faked disgust about Dimitri masking her knowledge of the rest of our associates.

Lissa leaned forward eagerly, speaking just before Hans could. "What was in Detroit? How was Rose going to clear herself? Especially with Jill?"

Hans didn't look happy about the interruption, but I knew he had to be curious about Jill and Detroit as well. He said nothing, perhaps hoping someone might slip and reveal a key piece of knowledge. Sydney, however, continued playing distant and cold.

"I have no idea. That Jill girl didn't seem to know either. Rose just said we had to get to her, so I helped her."

"Blindly?" asked Hans. "You really expect me to believe that you just trusted her like that?"

"She's my—" Sydney bit her lip on what I suspected was "friend." She turned her professional mode back on. "There was something believable about her, and I figured it'd be a waste of resources if the Alchemists had been helping you hunt the wrong murderer. If I decided she was guilty, I could always turn her in. And I thought . . . I thought if I was the one who solved this, I'd get the credit and a promotion." That was a good, good lie. An ambitious girl trying to improve her career on the sly? Very good. Well, not to everyone.

Hans shook his head. "I don't believe any of you."

The guy Alchemist took a step forward that made every guardian tense to jump him. "If she says that's the way it happened, then that's the way it happened." He had the same fierceness and mistrust that Stanton had, but there seemed to be more. A sort of protectiveness toward Sydney that was as personal as professional. Lissa picked up on it too.

"Easy, Ian," said Stanton, still keeping her eyes on Hans. Her composure reminded me more and more of Alberta. She couldn't be at ease with a roomful of guardians but wasn't showing it. "It doesn't matter if you believe her or not. The point remains: Miss Sage answered your questions. We're finished."

"Do Jill's parents know anything?" asked Lissa. She was still in shock at all of these developments—not to mention worried about me being out of my safe mountain town—but this mysterious shot at clearing my name was powerful. She couldn't let it go.

Sydney turned to Lissa, and I could practically read the Alchemist's thoughts. She knew how close Lissa and I were and would have liked to give Lissa some sort of comfort. There was no way, though, that Sydney could do that with these people in the room. She also had to be aware of the fact that I myself hadn't told Lissa anything about Jill.

"No," said Sydney. "We just went there, and Rose said Jill had to come with her. The Mastranos don't know why. And then—and then Rose did take her. Or Jill went with her. I'm not sure what happened. It all turned to chaos."

Neither the Alchemists nor guardians disputed me taking Jill, which made me think it was a story they'd gotten—and accepted—from both Jill's parents

and Sydney. It had just enough truth to be plausible—and explain Jill's disappearance. It didn't mention the Dragomir secret, however, which Emily was probably more than happy to keep quiet for now.

"There," said Stanton. "This is exactly what we told you before. We need to leave now." She turned toward the door, but guardians blocked the way.

"Impossible," said Hans. "This is a serious matter, and Miss Sage is the only link we have to a murder—a royal murder. And a kidnapping."

Stanton scoffed, and I remembered Sydney once saying the Alchemists thought the Moroi royalty system was silly. "She doesn't seem to be of much more use to you. But don't worry—we'll be holding her. Contact us if you have more questions."

"Unacceptable," said Hans. "She stays here."

Ian, the other Alchemist, joined the argument, moving protectively in front of Sydney. "We're not leaving one of our own here!" Again, I had that funny feeling about him. A crush, that was it. He had a crush on her and was treating this as more than just business. Stanton gave him a look that said she would handle this matter. He fell silent.

"You can all stay here, then," said Hans. "Makes no difference to me. We'll get you rooms."

"*That* is unacceptable." From there, she and Hans got into a raging argument. I didn't think it would come to blows, but the other guardians had closed in slightly as a precaution.

Ian's eyes darted between Stanton and Sydney, but he didn't get into the fray. Once, his gaze passed over the table Hans leaned against, and Ian suddenly did a double take at the photograph. It was only a brief pause, a slight widening of the eyes . . . but Lissa caught it.

She took a step toward Ian and Sydney. One of the guardians glanced at the movement, deemed Lissa safe, and returned to watching Stanton. "You know him," Lissa murmured, keeping her voice below the shouts. In fact, it was a little too low because she got blank looks from Sydney and Ian. Their ears couldn't hear what a Moroi or dhampir could have.

Lissa glanced uneasily around, not wanting to attract attention. She raised her volume slightly. "You know him. The guy in the picture."

Ian stared at Lissa, a bit of wonder and wariness on his face. He undoubtedly bore that same standoffish attitude toward vampires, but her words had caught him off guard. And, even if she was an evil creature of the night, she was a very pretty one.

"Ian," said Sydney softly. "What is it?" There was a note of urging in her voice, one that inadvertently played upon his crush, I think. He opened his mouth to speak, but then, the "conversation" among the others wrapped up. Sydney again became the center of attention, and Ian turned away from Lissa.

The compromise Stanton and Hans had reached was exactly that—a compromise. Neither was happy with it. There was a small town less than forty-five minutes away from Court, and the Alchemists would stay there—with several guardians on hand. It sounded like a house arrest to me, and Stanton's expression seemed to agree. I think she only consented because it was a human town. Before he'd let everyone go, Hans questioned my friends a final time, his eyes studying every face carefully.

"And none of you—*none* of you—know this Alchemist girl or have been in contact with her? Or know about her involvement with Hathaway?"

Again, Lissa and the others denied it, and again, Hans had no choice but to grudgingly accept the responses. Everyone moved toward the door, but Hans wouldn't let Eddie leave. "Not you, Castile. You're staying here until other matters are settled."

Lissa gasped. "What? But he—"

"Don't worry about it," said Eddie with a small smile. "Everything'll be okay. Just look after yourself."

Lissa hesitated, despite Christian tugging her arm to go. Although all accounts said Eddie had defended Lissa's life, he'd still killed a Moroi. That wouldn't be taken lightly. The guardians had to be 100 percent convinced he'd had no other choice before they'd release him. Seeing the strong, calm look on his face, Lissa knew he was prepared to handle whatever came.

"Thank you," she said, walking past him. "Thank you for saving me."

His answer was a slight nod, and Lissa stepped into the hallway—to find herself in more chaos.

"Where are they? I insist on—ah."

My friends and the Alchemists had been heading toward the exit while a group of guardians escorted them. Meanwhile, someone had entered the hall and was now being stopped and challenged by the guardians. It was Abe.

He took in every piece of the bizarre scenario in less than a heartbeat, his eyes passing over Sydney and the Alchemists as though he'd never seen them before. Through Lissa's eyes, I saw Sydney blanch, but nobody else noticed. Abe smiled at Lissa and sidled up to walk out with her.

"There you are. They want you for the last monarch test."

"And they sent you?" asked Christian skeptically.

"Well, I volunteered," replied Abe. "I'd heard there was some, er, excitement. Murder, fanatical religious humans, interrogations. All things I'm interested in, you know."

Lissa rolled her eyes but said nothing until the whole group emerged from the building. The Alchemists and their unwelcome escort went one way while Lissa and our friends went the other. Lissa longed to glance at Sydney and Ian—I did too—but knew it was best to keep moving forward and follow Abe's lead, particularly since some of those guardians were watching more than just the Alchemists.

As soon as Lissa's group was far enough away from the authorities, Abe's amiable smile vanished, and he turned on my friends. "What the hell happened? I've heard all sorts of crazy stories. Someone said you were dead."

"Nearly," said Lissa. She told him about the attack, expressing her fear over Eddie.

"He'll be fine," said Abe dismissively. "They have nothing to hold him on. The worst he'll get is a mark on his record."

Lissa was relieved by Abe's easy assurance, but I still felt guilty. Thanks to me, Eddie's record was already marred. His sterling reputation was declining on a daily basis.

"That was Sydney Sage," said Lissa. "I thought they were all in West Virginia. Why isn't she with Rose?"

"That," said Abe darkly, "is an excellent question."

"Because they were apparently kidnapping Jill Mastrano in Detroit," said Christian. "Which is weird. But not the craziest thing I can think of Rose doing." I appreciated the support.

Abe got a recap of this new development too, at least as much as my friends knew of it—which was only a fraction of the whole story. Abe picked up immediately that he'd been played, and it was obvious from his angry expression that he didn't like being kept in the dark. *Welcome to the club, old man*, I thought with small satisfaction. I hadn't forgotten how no one had filled me in on the escape plan. My smugness was short-lived because I was worried about what would happen to Sydney, now that Abe was on to her.

"That girl was lying to me," he growled. "Every day, all these reports about how quiet and boring it was in West Virginia. I wonder if they even made it to that town. I *have* to go talk to her."

"Good luck," said Adrian, pulling a cigarette out and lighting it. Apparently, in my absence, the dating contract he'd jokingly made up that said he would "cut back" on his vices didn't apply. "I don't think her cronies or the guardians are going to let you near her."

"Oh, I'll get to her," said Abe. "She's got a lot of answers. If she hid them from those other idiots, then good for her. But she's going to tell *me*."

A sudden thought sparked into Lissa's mind. "You have to talk to Ian. That guy with the Alchemists. He knows the man in the picture—er, I mean, the guy Eddie killed."

"You're certain?" asked Abe.

"Yes," said Adrian, surprising them all. "Ian definitely had a reaction. He's also got a crush on that Sydney girl."

"I saw that too," said Lissa.

"She seems kind of uptight." Adrian frowned. "But maybe their kind go for that."

"That crush might actually be useful," mused Abe. "You women don't know the power you wield. Have you seen that guardian your aunt's dating? Ethan Moore?"

"Yes," groaned Christian. "Don't remind me."

"Tasha *is* pretty hot, though," noted Adrian.

"That is not cool," said Christian.

"Don't get so huffy," said Abe. "Ethan's a palace guard. He was there the night of the murder—which could be very useful to us if she can keep him interested."

Christian shook his head. "Those guards already testified. It won't matter. Ethan's told what he knows."

"I'm not so sure," said Abe. "There are always things that occur off the official record, and I'm positive the guards were all debriefed with strict orders on what to reveal and not to reveal. Your aunt might be charming enough to find out something for us." Abe sighed, still looking very unhappy at the sudden upsetting of his orderly plans. "If only Sydney had been charming enough to talk her way out of that interrogation so that *I* could go interrogate her. Now I've got to break through those Alchemists and the guardians to get to her and figure out where Rose is. Oh, and you do actually have to go to

your test, princess."

"I thought that was just a line you used to find me," Lissa said.

"No, they want you." He gave her directions to the test. It was in the building she'd had the second test in. "All of you go together and then get a guardian to walk you back. Don't leave your room until Janine or Tad come by." Tad was one of Abe's henchmen. "No more surprise attacks."

Lissa wanted to argue that she most certainly wasn't going to put herself under house arrest but decided it was best to just let Abe go for now. He hurried off, still radiating agitation, and she and the guys turned toward the testing site.

"Boy, is he pissed," said Adrian.

"Do you blame him?" asked Christian. "He just lost membership in the evil mastermind club. His brilliant plan fell apart, and now his daughter's missing when he thought she was somewhere safe."

Adrian stayed pointedly silent.

"I hope she's okay," sighed Lissa, a knot forming in her stomach. "And what in the world does Jill have to do with any of this?"

Nobody had an answer for that one. When they reached the testing site, Lissa found a situation almost identical to before. Lots of spectators lining the hall. Guardians blocking the door. More people than ever were cheering her name as she approached, some who were "common" Moroi and others who were royals whose candidates were out of the running. A number of nominees hadn't passed the fear test, so those families had switched their loyalties.

Again, Lissa was ushered into the room alone. Her heart began to pound when she saw the same old woman. Were more terrible images to come? Lissa couldn't see the chalice, but that was no guarantee of safety. There was no extra chair, so Lissa simply stood in front of the old woman.

"Hello," Lissa said respectfully. "It's nice to see you again."

The woman grinned, showing those missing teeth. "I doubt that, but you say it very convincingly. You have politics in your blood."

"Thank . . . you . . ." said Lissa, unsure if she'd been complimented or not. "What would you like me to do for this test?"

"Just listen. That's all. It's an easy one."

A twinkle in the woman's eye made Lissa think this would not be easy.

"All you have to do is answer a question for me. Answer correctly, and you're through to the vote. And won't that be entertaining." The old woman seemed to say those last words more to herself than Lissa.

"Okay," said Lissa uneasily. "I'm ready."

The woman sized Lissa up and seemed to like what she saw. "Here it is then: What must a queen possess in order to truly rule her people?"

Lissa's mind went blank for a moment, and then a jumble of words popped into her head. *Integrity? Wisdom? Sanity?*

"No, no, don't answer," said the old woman, watching Lissa carefully. "Not yet. You have until tomorrow, at this same time, to think about it. Come back with the right answer, and you'll have passed the trials. And . . ." She winked. "It goes without saying you won't talk to anyone about this."

Lissa nodded, rubbing the small tattooed spot on her arm. She'd get no help with the answer from anyone else. Lissa left the room, turning the question

over and over in her mind. There were too many answers to a question like that, she thought. Any of them could—

Movement in my reality instantly snapped me out of her head. I half expected Sonya to come bursting into our tent, but no, that wasn't what had caught my attention. It was a much smaller motion . . . and something infinitely more powerful.

Dimitri was in my arms.

TWENTY-EIGHT

I STOPPED BREATHING. We'd each had our own blankets, but even in the middle of summer, the temperature had dropped during the night. Dimitri, in his sleep, had rolled over against me, merging our blankets into one pile and resting his head on my chest. His body lay against mine, warm and familiar, and he even snuggled a little closer.

He was more exhausted than I'd realized if he was doing this in his sleep. After all, this was the guy who slept with one eye open. But his guard was down now, his body unconsciously seeking . . . what? Simple warmth? *Me*? Damn it. Why had I asked Sonya my question? Why couldn't I keep going with my easy role as Adrian's girlfriend and Dimitri's friend? Because honestly, I wasn't doing a very good job at either one right now.

Tentatively, fearfully, I shifted slightly so that I could put one arm around Dimitri and draw him closer. I knew it was a risk, one that might wake him and break this spell. But it didn't. If anything, he seemed to relax more. Feeling him like that . . . holding him . . . it churned up a swarm of emotions within me. The ache I had felt since his loss burned within me. At the same time, holding him like this also seemed to fill that ache, as though a piece of me that had been missing was now restored. I hadn't even realized that piece was missing. I'd blocked it all out until Sonya's words had shaken my fragile new acceptance of life.

I don't know how long I stayed like that with Dimitri. It was long enough that the rising sun began to illuminate the tent's translucent fabric. That was all the light my eyes needed to now see Dimitri, to see the finely carved lines of his face and softness of his hair as he lay against me. I wanted so badly to touch that hair, to see if it felt like it used to. That was a silly sentiment, of course. His hair wouldn't have changed. Still . . . the urge was there, and I finally gave in, gently running my fingers over some stray locks. They were smooth and silky, and that barest touch sent chills through me. It also woke him up.

His eyes opened, instantly alert. I expected him to jump away from me, but instead, he only assessed the situation—and didn't move. I left my hand where it was on the side of his face, still stroking his hair. Our gazes locked, so much passing between us. In those moments, I wasn't in a tent with him, on the run from those who regarded us as villains. There was no murderer to catch, no Strigoi trauma to overcome. There was just him and me and the feelings that had burned between us for so long.

When he did move, it wasn't to get away. Instead, he lifted his head so that he looked down at me. Only a few inches separated us, and his eyes betrayed him. He wanted to kiss me—and I wanted him to. He leaned over me, one hand resting against my cheek. I readied myself for his lips—I needed them—and then he froze. He pulled back and sat up, exhaling in frustration as he looked away from me. I sat up as well, my breathing rapid and shallow.

"Wh-what's wrong?" I asked.

He glanced back at me. "Pick. There are lots of choices."

I ran a finger along my lips. So close. So, so close. "I know . . . I know things have changed. I know you were wrong. I know you can feel love again."

His mask was back up as he formulated his answer. "This isn't about love."

The last minute replayed in my head, that perfect connection, the way he'd looked at me and made my heart feel. Hell, Sonya claimed we even had some mystical connection. "If it's not about love, then what is it about?" I exclaimed.

"It's about doing the right thing," he said quietly.

The right thing? Right and wrong had been perennial topics at St. Vladimir's. I wasn't eighteen. He was my teacher. We were slated to be Lissa's guardians and had to give her our full attention. All of those were arguments for why staying apart had been necessary back then. But those had long since fallen by the wayside.

I would have questioned him more—if someone hadn't scratched at our door.

Both of us sprang up and apart, reaching for the stakes we'd slept near. Grabbing my stake was instinct because I knew there was no Strigoi out there. But lately, Strigoi had been the least of our worries.

"Rose? Dimitri?"

The voice was barely audible—but familiar. Relaxing slightly, I unzipped the tent's entrance and revealed Sonya kneeling in front of it. Like us, she wore the same clothes from earlier, and her auburn hair was messy. Otherwise, she seemed to have escaped her pursuers unscathed. I scooted aside so that she could enter.

"Cozy," she said, glancing around. "You've got the farthest spot out on the campground. Took me forever to find the car you described."

"How'd you get here?" I asked.

She winked. "You're not the only ones who can steal cars. Or, in my case, get people to ‘willingly' lend them."

"Were you followed?" asked Dimitri. He was all seriousness again, with no sign of what had passed moments ago.

"Not that I could tell," she said, shifting into a cross-legged position. "A couple guardians followed me back in the neighborhood, but I lost them a while ago. Most of them seemed more interested in you two."

"Imagine that," I muttered. "Too bad Victor was long gone—he might have taken priority."

"He didn't kill a queen," she said ruefully. We'd had to eventually tell her why Victor was wanted and that he'd been the one Sonya had sensed was stalking Lissa back at St. Vladimir's. "But the good news is I know where they're at now."

"Where?" asked Dimitri and I in unison.

A small, knowing smile came to her lips at that. "West Michigan," she said. "They took off in the opposite direction from Court."

"Damn," I muttered. Dimitri and I had gone southeast from Ann Arbor, clipping the Detroit suburbs and just crossing into Ohio. We'd picked the wrong direction. "But you saw Jill? Is she okay?"

Sonya nodded. "Fine. Scared, but fine. She described enough landmarks that I think we can locate their motel. I found her in a dream a couple hours ago; they had to rest. Victor wasn't feeling well. They might still be there."

"Then we need to leave now," said Dimitri, instantly in action. "Once they're moving, Jill will be awake and out of contact."

We packed up our campsite with amazing speed. My ankle felt better but was still sore. Noticing my limp, Sonya called a halt just before we got in her car.

"Hang on."

She knelt before me, examining the swelling ankle that was easily exposed by my torn dress. Taking a deep breath, she rested her hands on me, and a surge of electricity shot through my leg, followed by waves of heat and cold. When it was over and she stood up, the pain and swelling were gone, as were the scrapes on my legs. Probably the cuts on my head too. Spirit users had healed me so often that you'd think I'd be used to it, but it was still a little startling.

"Thank you," I said. "But you shouldn't have done that . . . shouldn't have used the magic . . ."

"You need to be in peak condition," she said. Her gaze drifted from me, staring off at the trees. "And the magic . . . well, it's hard to stay away from."

Indeed it was, and I felt guilty that she was using it on me—and moving closer to insanity. Robert's restoration had healed her mind a little, and she needed to take advantage of that. This was no time for a lecture, though, and Dimitri's expression told me he too thought it best I get back in shape.

We took off toward where Sonya told us Jill was, and this time, her directions were as specific as she could make them. No more vagueness or binding promises. We stopped once to "acquire" a new car and get a map. The info Sonya had gleaned from Jill led us to a town called Sturgis. While it was in the western half of Michigan, it was also south—meaning the distance wasn't quite as long as we'd expected. Nonetheless, Dimitri drove at least fifteen miles per hour over the speed limit the whole time.

"There," said Sonya, as we rolled into downtown Sturgis—which wasn't much of a downtown. We were near a modest-looking motel on a side street. "That's what she described. The Sunshine Motel."

Dimitri pulled into the lot behind the building, and we all sat there, staring at the motel, which didn't look as cheerful as its name. Like me, I presumed my companions were trying to figure out how to approach this. Jill's dream info had gotten us here, but Sonya had nothing else to help us find their room—if they were even still here. They certainly wouldn't have checked in under real names. I was going to suggest we just walk past the doors and hope Sonya would sense Robert when she suddenly pointed.

"That's their car," she said. "They're here."

Sure enough. There was the CR-V we'd taken to Jill's house. Talk about

karma. I'd swiped Victor's keys, and he'd repaid the favor by taking ours. None of us had thought much about his escape vehicle in the ensuing chaos.

"Sloppy," murmured Dimitri, eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "They should have switched cars."

"That's Sydney's," I pointed out. "It's not technically stolen, so it's not on any police lists. Besides, something tells me Victor and Robert aren't hot-wiring pros like *some* people are." We'd left a string of stolen cars across the Midwest.

Dimitri nodded, like I'd actually just complimented him. "Whatever the reason, it helps us."

"How do we find them?" asked Sonya.

I was about to suggest the aura plan but dismissed it. Robert would sense Sonya at the same moment, giving him brief warning. Plus, when we found the brothers, there'd likely be a fight. Doing it in the motel would attract attention. This parking lot was in back, away from the main road.

"We wait," I said. "It's amazing enough that they even stopped this long. If they have any sense, they'll leave soon."

"Agreed," said Dimitri, catching my eyes. *Souls in sync*. The memory of that near-kiss returned, and I looked away, fearing what my face would betray. "The lot's easy to defend too. Not much room for escape." It was true. The motel flanked one side, a concrete wall the other. There weren't many other buildings nearby either.

He moved our car to the farthest spot he could in the lot, providing us with a full view of it and the motel's exit—but keeping us semi-concealed. We considered sitting in the car, but Dimitri and I decided we should wait outside, giving us more mobility. We left Sonya inside. This wasn't her fight.

Standing behind the car with Dimitri, in the shadow of a leafy maple, I became acutely aware of his proximity and fierce warrior stance. He might be missing his duster, but I had to admit I liked the view of him I got without the coat.

"I don't suppose," I said softly, "that we're going to talk about this morning?"

Dimitri's eyes were fixed so hard on the CR-V that he might have been trying to make Jill and the brothers materialize inside it. I wasn't fooled. He was just avoiding looking at me. "There's nothing to talk about."

"I knew you'd say that. Actually, it was a toss-up between that and ‘I don't know what you're talking about.'"

Dimitri sighed.

"But," I continued, "there *is* something to talk about. Like when you almost kissed me. And what did you mean about ‘the right thing'?"

Silence.

"You wanted to kiss me!" It was hard to keep my voice low. "I saw it."

"Just because we want something doesn't mean it's right."

"What I said . . . it's true, isn't it? You *can* love, can't you? I realize now that right after the transformation, you really didn't think you could. And you probably couldn't. But things have changed. You're getting yourself back."

Dimitri gave me a sidelong look. "Yes. Things have changed . . . and some haven't."

"Okay, Mr. Enigma. That doesn't help explain the ‘right thing' comment."

Frustration filled his features. "Rose, I've done a lot of bad things, most of

which I can never fix or find redemption for. My only choice now, if I want to reclaim my life, is to go forward, stopping evil and doing what's right. And what is *not* right is taking a woman from another man, a man I like and respect. I'll steal cars. I'll break into houses. But there are lines I *will* not cross, no matter what I—"

The motel's back door opening jolted us to attention. It was no wonder my love life was so messed up when the most profound and intimate moments were always being interrupted by dire situations. It was just as well because I had never, ever seen that line coming: *What is* not *right is taking a woman from another man, a man I like and respect.*

New drama took precedence. Victor stepped outside, with Robert and Jill walking side by side behind him. I'd half expected to see her tied up and was surprised that she accompanied them so calmly. Too calmly, I soon realized. It wasn't natural. There was an almost robotic feel to her movements: she was being compelled into docility.

"Compulsion," said Dimitri quietly, recognizing it as well. "Go for Victor. I'll get Robert."

I nodded. "Jill will run as soon as the compulsion's broken. I hope." I didn't put it past her to join our fight, which could cause more harm than good. We'd find out soon enough.

Mercifully, no one else was around. It was still fairly early in the morning. Dimitri and I sprang out from our hiding spots, crossing the distance of the parking lot in a matter of moments. Two healthy dhampirs could outrace two old Moroi any day. And as crafty as they might be, the brothers hadn't expected us.

In my periphery, I just barely saw Dimitri kicking into warrior god mode, fierce and unstoppable. Then, I focused entirely on Victor, throwing my full weight at him and knocking him to the ground. He hit hard against the asphalt, and I pinned him down, slamming my fist into his face and making his nose bleed.

"Well done," he gasped out.

"I've been wanting to do that for a very long time," I growled.

Victor smiled through the pain and the blood. "Of course you have. I used to think Belikov was the savage one, but it's really you, isn't it? You're the animal with no control, no higher reasoning except to fight and kill."

I clenched his shirt and leaned him over him. "Me? I'm not the one who tortured Lissa for my own benefit. I'm not the one who turned my daughter Strigoi. And I'm sure as hell not the one who used compulsion to kidnap a fifteen-year-old girl!"

To my disgust, he kept that maddening smile on his face. "She's valuable, Rose. So, so valuable. You have no idea how much so."

"She's not an object for you to manipulate!" I cried. "She's a—ahh!"

The ground suddenly rolled up beneath me, a mini-earthquake centered around us. The asphalt bucked up, giving Victor the leverage to push me off. It wasn't a strong push, and I could have easily recovered my balance if not for the ground rippling and surrounding me, rolling like ocean waves to knock me over. Victor was using his earth magic to control the area where I stood. Faint cries of surprise told me others were feeling a little of it, but the magic was

clearly focused on me.

Not without cost, though. Victor was an old man—an old man I'd just shoved onto asphalt and punched. Pain and fatigue were all over him, and his labored breathing told me wielding magic this powerful—something I'd never seen an earth user do—was pushing every ounce of strength he had left.

One good punch. That was all I needed. One good punch would knock him down and take him out of this fight. Only, *I* was the one being taken down. Literally. Try as I might, my personal earthquake got the best of me, knocking me to my knees. I was still in that stupid dress too, meaning my newly healed legs got scraped again. And once I was down, the asphalt rose around me. I realized Victor was going to ensnare me by creating a stone prison. I couldn't let that happen.

"All that brawn for nothing," gasped out Victor, sweat pouring off his face. "It does you no good in the end. Real power is in the mind. In cunning. In controlling Jillian, I control Vasilisa. With Vasilisa, I control the Dragomirs, and from there—the Moroi. That's power. *That's* strength."

Most of his smug tirade went over me. But part of it stuck: *In controlling Jillian, I control Vasilisa*. Lissa. I couldn't let him hurt her. I couldn't let him use her. In fact, I couldn't let him use Jill either. Lissa had given me a *chotki*, which was kind of a cross between a bracelet and a rosary. It was a Dragomir heirloom, bestowed upon those who protected the family. That was my duty: to protect all the Dragomirs. The old guardian mantra rang in my mind: *They come first*.

With skill I didn't know I possessed, I sized up the shaking ground and attempted to stand again. I made it, practically dancing in that parking lot. And as I stared at Victor, I felt what Sonya had warned about: the catalyst. The spark that would ignite the darkness I'd gathered and gathered from Lissa. In looking at him, I saw all the evils of my life in one man. Was that entirely accurate? No, not exactly. But he had hurt my best friend—nearly killed her. He'd toyed with Dimitri and me, complicating what was already a mess of a relationship. He was now trying to control others. When would it end? When would his evil stop? Red and black tinged my vision. I heard a voice call my name—Sonya's, I think. But in that moment, there was nothing else in the world but Victor and my hate for him.

I sprang at him, fueled by rage and adrenaline, leaping out of the epicenter of shaking ground that threatened to seize me. Once more, I threw myself at him, but we didn't hit the ground. We'd shifted position slightly, and instead, we hit the concrete wall—with just as much force as I might have thrown a Strigoi. His head bent back at the impact. I heard an odd cracking sound, and Victor slumped to the ground. I immediately dropped down, grabbing his arms and shaking him.

"Get up!" I screamed. "Get up and fight me!" But no matter how much I shook him or yelled, Victor would not stand. He wouldn't move on his own.

Hands grabbed me, trying futilely to pull me away. "Rose—Rose! Stop. *Stop this.*"

I ignored the voice, ignored the hands. I was all anger and power, wanting —no, *needing*—Victor to face me once and for all. Suddenly, a strange sensation crept along me, like fingertips across my skin. *Let him go*. I didn't

want to, but for half a second, it seemed like a reasonable idea. I loosened my hold slightly, just enough for those hands to jerk me away. Like that, I snapped out of the haze and realized what had happened. The person who'd pulled me was Sonya, and she'd used a tiny bit of compulsion to get me away and let go of Victor. She was strong enough in her power that she didn't even need eye contact. She held onto me, even though she had to know it was wasted effort.

"I have to stop him," I said, wriggling from her grasp. "He has to pay." I reached for him again.

Sonya gave up on physical restraint, appealing to words instead. "Rose, he has! He's *dead*. Can't you see that? Dead. Victor's dead!"

No, I didn't see that—not at first. All I saw was my blind obsession, my need to get to Victor. But then, her words broke through to me. As I gripped Victor, I felt the limpness in his body. I saw the eyes that looked blankly at . . . nothing. That crazy, churning emotion in me faded, transforming into shock. My grip slackened as I stared at him and truly understood what she had said.

Understood what I had done.

Then, I heard a terrible sound. A low wailing broke through the frozen horror in my mind. I glanced back in alarm and saw Dimitri standing with Robert. Robert's arms were pinned behind his back as Dimitri effortlessly held him, but the Moroi was doing everything in his power—and failing—to break free. Jill stood nearby, looking uneasily at all of us, confused and afraid.

"Victor! Victor!"

Robert's pleas were muffled by sobs and as useless as my own efforts to get Victor up. I dragged my gaze back down to the body before me, barely believing what I had just done. I'd thought the guardians had been crazy in their reaction to Eddie killing a Moroi, but now, I was starting to understand. A monster like a Strigoi was one thing. But the life of a person, even a person who—

"Get him out of here!"

Sonya was so near me that the unexpected exclamation made me wince. She'd been kneeling too but now jumped to her feet, turning toward Dimitri.

"Get him out of here! As far as you can!"

Dimitri looked surprised, but the powerful command in her voice drove him to instant action. He began dragging Robert away. After a few moments, Dimitri simply opted to toss the man over his shoulder and cart him off. I would have expected cries of protest, but Robert had fallen silent. His eyes were on Victor's body—their gaze so sharp, so focused that they seemed like they could burn a hole through someone. Sonya, not having my fanciful impression, thrust herself between the brothers and dropped to the ground again, covering Victor's body with her own.

"Get him out of here!" she called again. "He's trying to bring Victor back! He'll be shadow-kissed!"

I was still confused and upset, still appalled at what I'd done, but the danger of what she said hit me hard. Robert couldn't be allowed to bring Victor back. The brothers were dangerous enough without being bonded. Victor couldn't be allowed to summon ghosts the way I could. Victor had to stay dead.

"Doesn't he have to touch the body?" I asked.

"To finish the bond, yes. But he was wielding tons of spirit just now, calling Victor's soul back and keeping it around," she explained.

When Dimitri and Robert were gone, Sonya told me to help her move the body. We'd made too much noise, and it was a wonder no one had come out yet. Jill joined us, and I moved without really being aware of what I was doing. Sonya found the keys to the CR-V on Victor and flattened the backseats to increase the rear cargo space. We crawled into it, the three of us having to hunch down to stay out of sight. We soon heard voices, people coming to see what had happened. I don't know long they were in the parking lot, only that they mercifully didn't search cars. Honestly? I had few coherent thoughts at all. That rage was gone, but my mind was a mess. I couldn't seem to get a hold of anything concrete. I felt sick and just followed Sonya's orders, staying low as I tried not to look at Victor's body.

Even after the voices were gone, she kept us in the car. At last, she exhaled a deep breath and focused on me. "Rose?" I didn't answer right away. "Rose?"

"Yeah?" I asked, voice cracking.

Her voice was soothing and cajoling. I felt that crawling on my skin again and a need to please her. "I need you to look at the dead. Open your eyes to them."

The dead? No. My mind felt out of control, and I had enough sense to know bringing ghosts here would be a bad idea. "I can't."

"You can," she said. "I'll help you. Please."

I couldn't refuse her compulsion. Expanding my senses, I let down the walls I kept around me. They were the walls that blocked me from the world of the dead and the ghosts that followed me around. Within moments, translucent faces appeared before me, some like normal people and others terrible and ghastly. Their mouths opened, wanting to speak but unable to.

"What do you see?" asked Sonya.

"Spirits," I whispered.

"Do you see Victor?"

I peered into the swarm of faces, seeking anyone familiar. "No."

"Push them back," she said. "Put your walls back up."

I tried to do as she said, but it was hard. I didn't have the will. I felt outside encouragement and realized Sonya was still compelling me. She couldn't make the ghosts disappear, but feelings of support and determination strengthened me. I shut out the restless dead.

"He's gone then," Sonya said. "He's either completely consumed by the world of the dead or is wandering as a restless spirit. Regardless, any lingering threads to life are gone. He can't come back to life." She turned to Jill. "Go get Dimitri."

"I don't know where he is," said Jill, startled.

Sonya smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. "Close, I'm sure. And watching. Go walk around the motel, the block, whatever. He'll find you."

Jill left, needing no compulsion. When she was gone, I buried my face in my hands. "Oh God. Oh God. All this time, I denied it, but it's true: I *am* a murderer."

"Don't think about that yet," said Sonya. Her take-charge attitude was almost comforting. Almost. It was easier to take orders than fend for yourself. "Deal

with your guilt later. For now, we have to get rid of the body."

I uncovered my eyes and forced myself to look at Victor. Nausea welled up within me, and those crazy feelings spun even more out of control. I gave a harsh laugh. "Yes. The body. I wish Sydney was here. But we don't have any magic potions. The sun won't destroy him. Weird, isn't it? Strigoi are harder to kill . . . harder to kill, easier to clean up." I laughed again because there was something familiar about my rambling . . . it was like Adrian in one of his weird moments. Or Lissa when spirit had pushed her to the edge. "This is it, isn't it?" I asked Sonya. "The flood . . . the flood you warned me about. Lissa escaped spirit, but it finally defeated me . . . just like Anna . . . just like the dream . . . oh God. This is the dream, isn't it? But I won't wake up . . ."

Sonya was staring at me, her blue eyes wide with . . . fear? Mockery? Alarm? She reached out and took my hand. "Stay with me, Rose. We'll push it back."

A knock at the window startled us both, and Sonya let Jill and Dimitri in.

"Where's Robert?" asked Sonya.

Dimitri glanced down at Victor and then promptly looked away. "Unconscious, hidden in some bushes around the corner."

"Charming," said Sonya. "Do you think that's smart? Leaving him?"

He shrugged. "I figured I shouldn't be seen carrying an unconscious guy in my arms. In fact . . . yes, I think we should just leave him there. He'll wake up. He's not a fugitive. And without Victor, he's . . . well, not harmless. But less harmful. We can't keep dragging him with us anyway."

I laughed again, that laugh that seemed unhinged and hysterical even to me. "He's unconscious. Of course. Of course. You can do that. You can do the right thing. Not me." I looked down at Victor. "'An animal,' he said. He was right. No higher reasoning . . ." I wrapped my arms around myself, my fingernails digging into my skin so hard they drew blood. *Physical pain to make the mental pain go away.* Wasn't that what Lissa had always said?

Dimitri stared at me and then turned to Sonya. "What's wrong?" he demanded. I'd seen him risk his life over and over, but never, until now, had he truly looked afraid.

"Spirit," said Sonya. "She's pulled and pulled for so long . . . and managed to hold it back. It's been waiting, though. Always waiting . . ." She frowned slightly, maybe realizing she was starting to sound like me. She turned to Jill. "Is that silver?"

Jill looked down at the heart-shaped locket around her neck. "I think so."

"Can I have it?"

Jill undid the clasp and passed it over. Sonya held it between her palms and closed her eyes a moment, pursing her lips. A few seconds later, her eyes opened, and she handed me the locket. "Put it on."

Just touching it gave me a strange tingling in my skin. "The heart . . ." I looked at Dimitri as I fastened the clasp. "Do you remember that? 'Where's the heart?' you asked. And here it is. Here it . . ."

I stopped. The world suddenly became crisper. My jumbled thoughts slowly began to move back together, forming some semblance of rationality. I stared at my companions—the living ones—truly seeing them now. I touched the locket.

"This is a healing charm."

Sonya nodded. "I didn't know if it'd work on the mind. I don't think it's a permanent fix . . . but between it and your own will, you'll be okay for a while."

I tried not to focus on those last words. *For a while.* Instead, I tried to make sense of the world around me. Of the body in front of me.

"What have I done?" I whispered.

Jill put her arm around me, but it was Dimitri who spoke.

"What you had to."

TWENTY-NINE

THE EVENTS THAT FOLLOWED were a blur. Sonya might have kept spirit's touch at bay, but it didn't matter. I was still in shock, still unable to think. They put me in the front seat, as far from Victor as possible. Dimitri drove us somewhere—I didn't pay much attention—where he and Sonya disposed of the body. They didn't say what they did, only that it was "taken care of." I didn't ask for details.

After that, we were back and headed toward Court. Sonya and Dimitri tossed around options on what to do when we got there. Seeing as no one had yet cleared my name, the current plan was that Sonya would have to escort Jill into Court. Jill asked if she could call her parents to let them know she was okay, but Dimitri felt that was a security risk. Sonya said she'd try to reach Emily in a dream, which made Jill feel a little better.

I coped during the drive by checking in on Lissa. Focusing on her took me away from the horrible guilt and emptiness I felt, the horror at what I'd done to Victor. When I was with Lissa, I wasn't me, and just then, that was my greatest desire. I didn't want to be me.

But things weren't perfect for her either. Like always, a number of issues were weighing her down. She felt close—so, so close—to unraveling who had killed Tatiana. The answer seemed within her grasp, if only she could reach just a little farther. The guardians had dragged Joe the janitor in, and after a fair amount of coercion—they had methods that didn't require magical compulsion—he'd admitted to having seen the twisted-handed Moroi in my building on the night of the murder. No amount of pushing would get Joe to admit he had been paid off—by either the man or Daniella. The most he'd admit was that he might have been "a little off" in his times that night. It was by no means hard evidence to save me.

Lissa had Ambrose's letter too, which had subtly threatened Tatiana. The writer had opposed the age law for being soft, disapproved of Tatiana's endorsement of spirit, and resented the secret training sessions. The letter might have been perfectly polite, but whoever penned it had had a serious grudge against the queen. That supported the political motive theories.

Of course, there were still lots of personal motives for the murder too. The sordid mess with Ambrose, Blake, and the women involved pegged any of them as the murderer. Daniella Ivashkov being on that list was a constant point of stress for Lissa, and she dared not breathe a word to Adrian. The saving grace there was that Daniella's bribery had been to get Adrian out of

trouble—not solidify my guilt. The unknown Moroi had funded that bribe. Surely, if she had killed Tatiana, Daniella would have paid for both of Joe's lies.

And of course, there was the last test pressing against Lissa's mind. The riddle. The riddle that seemed to have so many answers—and yet, none at all. *What must a queen possess in order to truly rule her people?* In some ways, it was more difficult than the other tests. Those had had a hands-on component, so to speak. This? This was her own intellect. No fire to build. No fear to look in the eye.

She hated that she took the riddle so seriously too. She didn't need its stress, not with everything else going on. Life would have been simpler if she'd kept treating the trials simply as a scam to buy us time. The Court was continually swelling with those who had come to see the election, and more and more of them—much to her disbelief—were throwing their support behind her. She could hardly walk anywhere without people calling out about "the Dragon" or "Alexandra reborn." Word of her attack had gotten out too, which seemed to have fueled her supporters even more.

But, of course, Lissa still had plenty of opposition. The biggest case against her was the same old legal one: that she wouldn't be eligible for votes when the time came. Another mark against her was her age. She was too young, her opponents said. Who would want a child on the throne? But Lissa's admirers wouldn't hear any of it. They kept citing young Alexandra's rule and the miracles Lissa had wrought with her healing. Age was irrelevant. The Moroi needed young blood, they cried. They also demanded the voting laws be changed.

Unsurprisingly, her opponents also kept bringing up the fact that she was tied to a queen-killing murderer. I'd have thought that would have been the biggest issue in her candidacy, but she'd been so convincing about how I'd shocked and betrayed her that many felt her being queen would actually right the wrong I'd committed. She'd used bits of compulsion whenever the topic came up, which also went a long way in making others think she was now completely dissociated from me.

"I'm so tired of this," Lissa told Christian, back in her room. She'd sought escape there and was lying on her bed in his arms. My mom was there, on guard. "This queen thing was a horrible idea."

Christian stroked her hair. "It's not. Abe said the election will be delayed because of the uproar. And no matter how much you complain, I know you're proud you made it this far."

It was true. The chalice test had cut the nominees in half. Only five remained. Ariana Szelsky was one of them, as was Daniella's cousin, Rufus Tarus. Lissa was the third, with Marcus Lazar and Marie Conta rounding out the group. Ronald Ozera hadn't made it through.

My mother spoke up. "I've never seen anything like this—it's incredible how much support you're getting. The Council and other royals are under no obligations to change the law. But the mob's loud . . . and gaining the love of ‘commoners' could benefit certain royals. Standing by your claim to run would certainly reflect well on a couple families that are out of favor. What's holding them back is the thought that you might actually win. So they'll just keep

arguing and arguing."

Lissa stiffened. "Winning . . . that's not really possible, is it? Ariana's got it sealed . . . right?" Winning had never been a part of this crazy plan, and now, with so few candidates, the pressure was even greater to get Ariana on the throne. As far as Lissa was concerned, the other candidates showed no promise of improving Moroi life. Ariana *had* to win.

"I'd say so," said Janine. There was pride in her voice, seeing how close she was to the Szelsky family. "Ariana's brilliant and competent, and most people know it. She'd treat dhampirs fairly—more so than some of the other candidates. She's already spoken about reversing the age law."

The thought of worse laws oppressing the dhampirs made Lissa's stomach sink. "God, I hope she wins. We can't have anything else go wrong."

A knock at the door snapped my mom into full guardian mode until Lissa said, "It's Adrian."

"Well," muttered Christian, "at least his timing's better than usual."

Sure enough, my boyfriend entered, wreathed in his now usual scent of smoke and liquor. True, his vices were the least of my concerns, but it kept bugging me that he needed *me* to be there in person to enforce his good behavior. It reminded me of when he said I was his strength.

"Get up, guys," he said. He looked very pleased with himself. "We've got a visit to pay."

Lissa sat up, puzzled. "What are you talking about?"

"I am *not* hanging out with Blake Lazar again," warned Christian.

"You and me both," said Adrian. "I've got someone better. And more attractive. Remember how you were wondering how close Serena was to Grant? Well, looks like you can ask her yourself. I found her. And yes, you're welcome."

A frown crossed my mother's face. "Last I heard, Serena had been sent away to teach at a school. One on the east coast, I think." After the Strigoi attack that had killed Grant and several others, the guardians had decided to pull Serena from active bodyguard duty for a while. She'd been the only guardian to survive.

"She is, but since it's summer, they brought her back to help with election crowd control. She's working the front gates."

Lissa and Christian exchanged looks. "We have to talk to her," said Lissa excitedly. "She might have known who Grant was secretly teaching."

"That doesn't mean one of them killed Tatiana," warned my mother.

Lissa nodded. "No, but there's a connection, if Ambrose's letter is right. She's there now? At the gates?"

"Yup," said Adrian. "And we probably don't even need to buy her a drink."

"Then let's go." Lissa stood and reached for her shoes.

"Are you sure?" asked Christian. "You know what's waiting out there."

Lissa hesitated. It was late at "night" for Moroi, but that didn't mean everyone was in bed—especially at the gates, which was always jam-packed with people lately. Clearing my name was too important, Lissa decided. "Yeah. Let's do it."

With my mother leading the way, my friends made their way to the Court's entrance. (The "door" that Abe had made had been patched up.) The Court

was surrounded in high, multicolored stone walls that helped further the human image that this was actually an elite school. Wrought iron gates at the entrance stood open, but a group of guardians blocked the road leading into Court grounds. Normally, only two guardians would have manned the booth at the gate. The extra numbers were both for greater interrogation of cars and for crowd control. Spectators lined the road's sides, watching the arriving cars as though they were at a red carpet premiere. Janine knew a roundabout way that avoided some people—but not all.

"Don't cringe," Christian told Lissa as they passed a particularly vocal group, which had noticed her. "You're a queenly nominee. Act like it. You deserve this. You're the last Dragomir. A daughter of royalty."

Lissa gave him a brief, astonished look, surprised to hear the fierceness in his voice—and that he clearly believed his words. Straightening up, she turned toward her fans, smiling and waving back, which excited them that much more. *Take this seriously*, she reminded herself. *Don't disgrace our history*.

In the end, getting through the crowd to the gate proved easier than getting time alone with Serena. The guardians were swamped and insisted on keeping Serena for screening, but my mom had a quick conversation with the guardian in charge. She reminded him of Lissa's importance and offered to stand in for Serena for a few minutes.

Serena had long since healed from the Strigoi attack. She was my age, blond-haired and pretty. She was clearly surprised to see her former charge. "Princess," she said, maintaining formalities. "How can I help you?"

Lissa pulled Serena away from the cluster of guardians speaking to the Moroi drivers lined up at the gate. "You can call me Lissa. You know that. You taught me to stab pillows, after all."

Serena gave her a small smile. "Things have changed. You might be our next queen."

Lissa grimaced. "Unlikely." *Especially since I have no clue how to solve that riddle*, she thought. "But I do need your help. You and Grant spent a lot of time together . . . did he ever mention training Moroi for Tatiana? Like, secret combat sessions?"

Serena's face gave the answer away, and she averted her eyes. "I'm not supposed to talk about that. He wasn't even supposed to tell me."

Lissa gripped the young guardian's arm in excitement, making Serena flinch. "You have to tell me what you know. Anything. Who he was training . . . how they felt about it . . . who was successful. *Anything*."

Serena paled. "I *can't*," she whispered. "It was done in secret. On the queen's orders."

"My aunt's dead," said Adrian bluntly. "And you said yourself you might be talking to the future queen." This earned a glare from Lissa.

Serena hesitated, then took a deep breath. "I can pull together a list of names. I might not remember all of them, though. And I have no clue how well they were doing—only that a lot resented it. Grant felt like Tatiana had purposely picked those most unwilling."

Lissa squeezed her hand. "Thank you. Thank you so much."

Serena still looked pained at giving up the secret information. *They come first* didn't always work when your loyalties were split. "I'll have to get it to

you later, though. They need me here."

Serena returned to her post, bringing my mother back to Lissa. As for me, I returned to my own reality in the car, which had come to a stop. I blinked to clear my eyes and take in our surroundings. Another hotel. We should have had gold member status by now. "What's going on?"

"We're stopping," said Dimitri. "You need to rest."

"No, I don't. We need to keep going to Court. We need to get Jill there in time for the elections." Our initial goal in finding Jill had been to give Lissa voting power. It had since occurred to us that if Lissa running was mucking up the elections, the surprise appearance of her sister would likely create just as much sensation and disbelief. A genetic test would clear up any doubts and give Lissa her voting power, but the initial confusion would buy us more of the time we so badly needed to find the murderer. In spite of the random evidence my friends kept turning up, they still had no substantial theories on a culprit.

Dimitri gave me a *don't lie to me* look. "You were just with Lissa. Are the elections actually happening yet?"

"No," I admitted.

"Then you're getting some rest."

"I'm *fine*," I snapped.

But those fools wouldn't listen to me. Checking in was complicated because none of us had a credit card, and it wasn't the hotel's policy to take a cash deposit. Sonya compelled the desk clerk into thinking it *was* their policy, and before long, we had booked two adjoining rooms.

"Let me talk to her alone," Dimitri murmured to Sonya. "I can handle it."

"Be careful," Sonya warned. "She's fragile."

"You guys, I'm right here!" I exclaimed.

Sonya took Jill's arm and guided her into one of the rooms. "Come on, let's order room service."

Dimitri opened the other door and looked at me expectantly. With a sigh, I followed and sat on the bed, my arms crossed. The room was a hundred times nicer than the one in West Virginia. "Can *we* order room service?"

He pulled up a chair and sat opposite me, only a couple feet away. "We need to talk about what happened with Victor."

"There's nothing to talk about," I said bleakly. The dark feelings I'd been shoving back during the drive suddenly fell upon me. They smothered me. I felt more claustrophobic than when I'd been in the cell. Guilt was its own prison. "I really am the murderer everyone says I am. It doesn't matter that it was Victor. I killed him in cold blood."

"That was hardly cold blood."

"The hell it wasn't!" I cried, feeling tears spring to my eyes. "The plan was to subdue him and Robert so we could free Jill. *Subdue*. Victor wasn't a threat to me. He was an old man, for God's sake."

"He seemed like a threat," said Dimitri. His calmness was the counter to my growing hysteria, as usual. "He was using his magic."

I shook my head, burying my face in my hands. "It wasn't going to kill me. He probably couldn't have even kept it up much longer. I could have waited it out or escaped. Hell, I did escape! But instead of capturing him, I slammed

him against a concrete wall! He was no match for me. An old man. I killed an *old man*. Yeah, maybe he was a scheming, corrupt old man, but I didn't want him dead. I wanted him locked up again. I wanted him to spend the rest of his life in prison, living with his crimes. *Living*, Dimitri."

It seemed strange that I'd feel this way, considering how much I hated Victor. But it was true: it hadn't been a fair fight. I'd acted without thinking. My training had always been about defense and striking out against monsters. Honor had never really come up, but suddenly, it meant a lot to me. "There was no honor in what I did to him."

"Sonya said it wasn't your fault." Dimitri's voice was still gentle, which somehow made me feel worse. I wished he'd chastise me, confirming the guilt I felt. I wanted him to be my critical instructor. "She said it was a backlash of spirit."

"It was. . . ." I paused, recalling the haze of that fight as best I could. "I never really understood what Lissa experienced in her worst moments until then. I just looked at Victor . . . and I saw everything evil in the world—an evil I had to stop. He was bad, but he didn't deserve that. He never stood a chance." *Honor*, I kept thinking. *What honor is there in that?*

"You aren't listening, Rose. It wasn't your fault. Spirit's a powerful magic we barely understand. And its dark edge . . . well, we know it's capable of terrible things. Things that can't be controlled."

I lifted my eyes to his. "I should have been stronger than it." There it was. The thought behind all my guilt, all these horrible emotions. "I should have been stronger than it. I was weak."

Dimitri's reassuring words didn't come so quickly. "You aren't invincible," he said at last. "No one expects you to be."

"*I* do. What I did . . ." I swallowed. "What I did was unforgivable."

His eyes widened in shock. "That . . . that's crazy, Rose. You can't punish yourself for something you had no power over."

"Yeah? Then why are you still—"

I stopped because I'd been about to accuse Dimitri of continuing to punish himself. Except . . . he no longer was. Did he feel guilt for what he'd done as a Strigoi? I was certain of it. Sonya had admitted as much. But somewhere in this journey, he had taken control of his life again, bit by bit. She'd told me that, but only now did I truly understand.

"When?" I asked. "When did it change? When did you realize you could keep living—even after all that guilt?"

"I'm not sure." If the question surprised him, he hid it. His eyes were locked with mine, but they weren't quite focused on me. The puzzle occupied him. "In bits, really. When Lissa and Abe first came to me about breaking you out, I was ready to do it because she asked me to. Then, the more I thought about it, the more I realized it was personal too. I couldn't stand the thought of you locked in a cell, being cut off from the world. It wasn't right. No one should live like that, and it occurred to me that I was doing the same—by choice. I was cutting myself off from the world with guilt and self-punishment. I had a second chance to live, and I was throwing it away."

I was still in turmoil, still raging and full of grief, but his story kept me quiet and transfixed. Hearing him pour his heart out was a rare opportunity.

"You heard me talk about this before," he continued. "About my goal to appreciate life's little details. And the more we continued on our journey, the more I remembered who I was. Not just a fighter. Fighting is easy. It's *why* we fight that matters, and in the alley that night with Donovan . . ." He shuddered. "That was the moment I could have crossed over into someone who fights just to senselessly kill—but you pulled me back, Rose. That was the turning point. You saved me . . . just as Lissa saved me with the stake. I knew then that in order to leave the Strigoi part of me behind, I had to fight through to be what they *aren't*. I had to embrace what they reject: beauty, love, honor."

Right then, I was two people. One was overjoyed. Hearing him talk like that, realizing he was fighting his demons and close to victory . . . well, I nearly wept with joy. It was what I'd wanted for him for so long. At the same time, his inspiring words only reminded me how far I'd fallen. My sorrow and self-pity took over again.

"Then you should understand," I said bitterly. "You just said it: honor. It matters. We both know it does. I've lost mine. I lost it out there in the parking lot when I killed an innocent."

"And I've killed hundreds," he said flatly. "People much more innocent than Victor Dashkov."

"It's not the same! You couldn't help it!" My feelings exploded to the surface again. "Why are we repeating the same things over and over?"

"Because they aren't sinking in! *You* couldn't help it either." His patience was cracking. "Feel guilty. Mourn this. But move on. Don't let it destroy you. Forgive yourself."

I leapt to my feet, catching him by surprise. I leaned down, putting us face to face. "Forgive myself? That's what you want? *You* of all people?"

Words seemed to escape him. I think it had to do with my proximity. He managed a nod.

"Then tell me this. You say you moved past the guilt, decided to revel in life and all that. I get it. But have you, in your heart, really forgiven *yourself*? I told you a long time ago that I forgave you for everything in Siberia, but what about you? Have you done it?"

"I just said—"

"No. It's not the same. You're telling me to forgive myself and move on. But you won't do it yourself. You're a hypocrite, comrade. We're either both guilty or both innocent. Pick."

He rose as well, looking down at me from that lofty height. "It's not that simple."

I crossed my arms over my chest, refusing to be intimidated. "It *is* that simple. We're the same! Even Sonya says we are. We've always been the same, and we're both acting the same stupid way now. We hold ourselves up to a higher standard than everyone else."

Dimitri frowned. "I—Sonya? What does she have to do with any of this?"

"She said our auras match. She said we light up around each other. She says it means you still love me and that we're in sync, and . . ." I sighed and turned away, wandering across the room. "I don't know. I shouldn't have mentioned it. We shouldn't buy into this aura stuff when it comes from magic users who are already half-insane."

I reached the window and leaned my forehead against the cool glass, trying to decide what to do. *Forgive myself.* Could I? A small city sprawled before me, though I'd lost track of where we were. Cars and people moved below, souls out living their lives. I took a deep breath. The image of Victor on the asphalt was going to stay with me for a long, long time. I had done something horrible, even if my intentions were good, but everyone was right: I hadn't been myself. Did that change what had happened? Would that bring Victor back? No. And honestly, I didn't know how I would move past what I'd done, how I'd shake the bloody images in my head. I just knew I had to go on.

"If I let this stop me," I murmured, "if I do nothing . . . then that's the greater evil. I'll do more good by surviving. By continuing to fight and protect others."

"What are you saying?" asked Dimitri.

"I'm saying . . . I forgive myself. That doesn't make everything perfect, but it's a start." My fingertip traced the line of a tiny crack in the glass's surface. "Who knows? Maybe that outburst in the parking lot let out some of the darkness Sonya says is in my aura. Skeptic that I am, I have to give her some points. She was right that I was at a breaking point, that all I needed was a spark."

"She was right about something else too," Dimitri said after a long pause. My back was to him, but there was a strange quality to his voice that made me turn around.

"What's that?" I asked.

"That I do still love you."

With that one sentence, everything in the universe changed.

Time slowed to one heartbeat. The world became his eyes, his voice. This wasn't happening. It wasn't real. None of it could be real. It felt like a spirit dream. I resisted the urge to close my eyes and see if I'd wake up moments later. No. No matter how unbelievable it all seemed, this was no dream. This was real. This was life. This was flesh and blood.

"Since . . . since when?" I finally managed to ask.

"Since . . . forever." His tone implied the answer was obvious. "I denied it when I was restored. I had no room for anything in my heart except guilt. I especially felt guilty about you—what I'd done—and I pushed you away. I put up a wall to keep you safe. It worked for a while—until my heart finally started accepting other emotions. And it all came back. Everything I felt for you. It had never left; it was just hidden from me until I was ready. And again . . . that alley was the turning point. I looked at you . . . saw your goodness, your hope, and your faith. Those are what make you beautiful. So, so beautiful."

"So it wasn't my hair," I said, unsure how I was even capable of making a joke at a time like this.

"No," he said gently. "Your hair was beautiful too. All of you. You were amazing when we first met, and somehow, inexplicably, you've come even farther. You've always been pure, raw energy, and now you control it. You're the most amazing woman I've ever met, and I'm glad to have had that love for you in my life. I regret losing it." He grew pensive. "I would give anything—anything—in the world to go back and change history. To run into your arms after Lissa brought me back. To have a life with you. It's too late, of course,

but I've accepted it."

"Why . . . why is it too late?"

Dimitri's eyes grew sad. "Because of Adrian. Because you've moved on. No, listen," he said, cutting off my protests. "You were right to do that after how I treated you. And more than anything else, I want you to be happy once we clear your name and get Jill recognized. You said yourself that Adrian makes you happy. You said you love him."

"But . . . you just said you love me. That you want to be with me." My words seemed clumsy, unworthy of his eloquence.

"And I told you: I'm not going to pursue another man's girlfriend. You want to talk honor? There it is in its purest form."

I walked toward him, each step ramping up the tension around us. Dimitri kept saying the alley was his turning point. For me? It was *now*. I stood on the precipice of something that would change my life. For the last week, I'd done a very good job of detaching myself from anything romantic with Dimitri. And yet . . . had I? What *was* love, really? Flowers, chocolate, and poetry? Or was it something else? Was it being able to finish someone's jokes? Was it having absolute faith that someone was there at your back? Was it knowing someone so well that they instantly understood why you did the things you did—and shared those same beliefs?

All week, I'd claimed my love for Dimitri was fading. In reality, it had been growing more and more. I hadn't even realized it was happening. I had been re-establishing our old rapport, strengthening the connection. Reaffirming that of all the people in the world—even Lissa—Dimitri was the only one who truly *got* me.

I'd meant it: I loved Adrian. It was hard to imagine life without him, but my other words at the Mastranos' had betrayed me: *I have fun with him*. Now, you should have fun with the one you love, but that shouldn't have been what first came to mind. I should have said, *We strengthen each other.* Or, *He makes me want to be a better person.* Perhaps most importantly: *He understands me perfectly*.

But none of that was true, so I hadn't said those things. I'd sought Adrian for comfort. His familiarity and humor were an important part of my world. And if he was in danger? I'd throw my life before his, just as I would for Lissa. Yet, I didn't inspire him, not really. He was trying. He did want to be a better person, but at this moment in his life, his motivations were more about impressing others—about impressing me. It wasn't for himself. That didn't make him bad or weak, but it made me his crutch. He would get past that, I was certain. He would eventually come into his own and be an amazing man, but he wasn't at that point of self-discovery yet. I was.

I stood in front of Dimitri now, looking into those dark eyes again, the eyes I loved so much. I placed my hands on his chest, feeling his heart beating strong and steady—and maybe a bit faster than normal. Warmth spread through my fingertips. He reached up and caught hold of my wrists but didn't push me away. The lines of that gorgeous face looked strained as he fought some inner conflict, but now that I knew—now that I knew for sure—I could see his love for me. Love mingled with desire. It was so, so obvious.

"You should have told me," I said. "You should have told me this a long time

ago. I love you. I've never stopped loving you. You have to know that."

His breath caught when I said *I love you*, and I could see his internal struggle for control become an all-out war. "It wouldn't have made any difference. Not with Adrian involved," he said. The fingers around my hand tightened slightly as though he really might push me away this time. He didn't. "I mean it. I won't be that guy, Rose. I won't be that man who takes someone else's woman. Now, please. Let go. Don't make this any more difficult."

I ignored the request. If he'd wanted to get away from me, he could have. I splayed my fingers, touching more of his chest, drinking in the feel of that warm contact I'd missed for so long.

"I don't belong to him," I said in a low voice, pushing close to Dimitri and tilting my head back so that I could see his face clearly. So much emotion, so much conflict as his heart tried to decide right from wrong. Being pressed against him felt like . . . completion. Sonya had said no couple could share one aura or one soul, but ours weren't meant to be apart. They fit together like a puzzle, two individuals making something greater than themselves. "I don't belong to anyone. I make my own choices."

"And you're with Adrian," said Dimitri.

"But I was meant for you."

And that did it. Any pretense of control or reason either of us possessed melted away. The walls crumbled, and everything we'd been holding back from each other came rushing out. I reached up, pulling us together for a kiss—a kiss he didn't let go this time. A kiss I didn't end by punching him. His arms encircled me as he lifted me onto the bed, one hand soon sliding along my hip and down to my leg, already half-bare, thanks to that poor tattered dress.

Every nerve in my body lit up, and I felt that desire returned in him—and then some. After a world of death, he seemed to appreciate love more. Not only that, he *needed* it. He needed life. He needed me—not just physically, but in the same way my heart and soul always cried out for him. What we did then, as our clothes came off and we brought our bodies together became more than just lust—even though there was plenty of that too.

Being with him after so long, after everything we'd endured . . . it was like coming home. Like finally being where—with whom—I belonged. My world, my heart . . . they'd shattered when I lost him. But as he looked at me, as his lips spoke my name and ran along my skin . . . I knew those pieces could come back together. And I knew, with absolute certainty, that waiting for this—for my second time having sex—had been the right thing to do. Anyone else, any other time . . . it would have been wrong.

When we finished, it was like we still couldn't get close enough. We held each other tightly, our limbs entwined, as though maybe closing the distance now would make up for the distance that had been between us for so long.

I closed my eyes, my senses flooded with him, and sighed dreamily. "I'm glad you gave in. I'm glad your self-control isn't as strong as mine."

This made him laugh, and I felt it rumble through his chest. "Roza, my self-control is ten times stronger than yours."

I opened my eyes, shifting to look into his. I brushed his hair back and

smiled, certain my heart would expand and expand until there was nothing left of me. "Oh yeah? That's not the impression I just got."

"Wait until next time," he warned. "I'll do things that'll make you lose control within seconds."

That comment was just asking for a witty Rose Hathaway quip. It also made my blood burn, which was why we were both surprised when I abruptly said, "There may not be a next time."

Dimitri's hand, tracing the shape of my shoulder, froze. "What? Why?"

"We have a couple of things to do before this happens again."

"Adrian," he guessed.

I nodded. "And that's *my* problem, so put your honor-able thoughts aside. I have to face him and answer for this. I will. And you . . ." I couldn't believe what I was about to say. I couldn't believe I meant it. "You still have to forgive yourself if we're going to be together."

His puzzled expression turned to pain. "Rose—"

"I'm serious." I met his eyes unflinchingly. "*You* have to forgive yourself. For real. Everyone else has. If you can't, then you can't go on either. *We* can't."

It was one of the biggest gambles of my life. Once, I would have run to him without question, ignoring our problems, overjoyed just to be with him. Now . . . after everything I'd been through, I'd changed. I loved him. I loved him so much, and I wanted him. But it was because of the strength of that love that I had to do this. If were going to be together, we had to do it the right way. Sex had been amazing, but it wasn't a magical cure for everything. Damn. Somewhere along the way, I'd picked up common sense. I still intended to confront Adrian. And if Dimitri wouldn't do what I asked, I really would walk away. I'd lose both men, but it was better to be alone with my self-respect than be in the wrong relationship.

"I don't know," Dimitri said at last. "I don't know if I can . . . if I'm ready."

"Decide soon then," I said. "You don't have to right this second, but eventually . . ."

I didn't push the topic after that. For now, I would let it go, though I knew he would hold onto it and grasp its importance. I knew I was right to stand by it too. He couldn't be happy with me if he wasn't happy with himself. It occurred to me then, as I stood up for myself and what I needed, that our old teacher-student roles were gone forever. Now we really were equals.

I rested my head on his chest and felt him relax. We'd bask in this moment, if only for a little longer. Sonya had said we needed "rest," making me think we still had some time here before the ticking clock drove us back to Court. As Dimitri and I continued to keep close to one another, I found myself actually wanting to sleep. I was exhausted from the fight—which, I realized, had taken a very unexpected turn. My guilt and despair over Victor and the explosion of spirit had taken their toll too, no matter the healing locket still around my neck. And yes, I thought with a small smile, I was simply exhausted from what Dimitri and I had just done. It was kind of nice to use my body for something that didn't result in serious injury for a change.

I fell asleep in his embrace, blackness wrapping around me as warmly as his arms. It should have been that simple. It should have been peaceful, happy rest. But as usual, I wasn't that lucky.

A spirit dream pulled me from the enveloping depths of sleep, and for half a second, I thought maybe Robert Doru had come for me to take revenge for his brother's death.

But, no. No vindictive Dashkov. Instead, I found myself staring into a pair of emerald-green eyes.

Adrian.

THIRTY

I DIDN'T RUN INTO HIS arms like I usually did. How could I? After what I'd done? No. I couldn't play act anymore. I still wasn't entirely sure what the future held for Dimitri and me, not until he answered my ultimatum. I did, however, know I had to cut Adrian loose. My feelings for him were still strong, and I wondered if it was even remotely possible for us to be friends. Regardless, I couldn't lead him on after sleeping with Dimitri. It hadn't been murder, no, but it had certainly been dishonorable.

Yet . . . I couldn't say any of that to Adrian now, I realized. I couldn't break up with him in a dream. That was almost as bad as a text breakup. Besides, I had a feeling that . . . well, I'd probably need his help. So much for honor. *Soon*, I swore. *Soon I'll tell him.*

He didn't seem to notice my lack of embrace. But he did notice something else.

"Wow."

We stood in St. Vladimir's library of all places, and I gave him a puzzled look across the study tables stretching before us. "Wow what?"

"Your . . . your aura. It's . . . amazing. It's shining. I mean, it always shines, but today . . . well, I've never seen anything like it. I didn't expect that after everything that happened."

I shifted uncomfortably. If I lit up around Dimitri normally, what on earth happened to my aura post-sex? "After what happened?" I asked, deflecting the comment.

He chuckled and approached me. His hand reached unconsciously for his cigarettes, paused, and then dropped to his side. "Oh, come on. Everyone's talking about it. How you and Belikov kidnapped Jailbait—what's up with that anyway?—and coerced that Alchemist. It's the hottest news around here. Well, aside from the elections. The last test is coming up."

"That's right . . ." I murmured. It had almost been twenty-four hours since Lissa had received the riddle. There was only a little time left, and last I knew, she had no answer.

"Why are you sleeping in the middle of the day anyway?" he asked. "I didn't really expect to catch you. Figured you'd be on a human schedule."

"It . . . it was kind of a rough night, what with escaping a legion of guardians and all."

Adrian caught hold of my hand, frowning slightly when I didn't squeeze his in return. The frown lightened quickly into his easy smile. "Well, I'd worry

more about your old man than them. He is *pissed* that you didn't stay put. And that he can't get in to see the Alchemists. Believe me, he's been trying."

That almost made me laugh, except it wasn't the outcome I'd wanted either. "So he's not all-powerful after all." I sighed. "That's what we need. Sydney. Or, well, that guy who's with her. The one who allegedly knows something." I flashed back, again seeing the recognition on Ian's face. *He knows the man who attacked Lissa and bribed Joe*. "We need him."

"From what I picked up," said Adrian, "the guardians are just kind of lingering around the hotel, mostly concerned with the Alchemists leaving. But they're controlling who's getting in. They won't let any of us—or other Alchemists—get through. There are lots of other human guests, and I guess Abe tried to disguise himself—and failed."

Poor *Zmey*. "He should have had more faith in the guardians. They aren't going to let anyone but themselves get in and out." My own words brought me to a halt. "That's it . . ."

Adrian eyed me suspiciously. "Oh no. I know that look. Something crazy is about to happen."

I caught hold of his hand, now out of excitement, rather than love. "Get to Mikhail. Have him meet us . . ." I blanked. I'd seen the town the Alchemists were staying in. As the closest to Court, we often drove through it. I racked my brain, trying to think of some detail. "At that restaurant with the red sign. It's on the far side. Always advertising buffets."

"Easier said than done, little dhampir. They're using every guardian at Court to keep the elections under control. If Lissa hadn't been attacked, they wouldn't let your mom stay with her. I don't think Mikhail can get out."

"He'll find a way," I said confidently. "Tell him this is it—it's the key to the murder. The answer. He's resourceful."

Adrian looked skeptical, but it was hard for him to refuse me anything. "When?"

When indeed? It was almost noon, and I hadn't paid much attention to where we'd stopped. How long would it take us to reach Court? From what I knew about the elections, those who passed this last test would give speeches when the Moroi day started. In theory, they'd then go straight to voting—except, if our plan worked, Lissa's involvement would slow that down for days. Provided she passed.

"Midnight," I said. If I was guessing correctly, the Court would be completely wrapped up in the election drama, making it easier for Mikhail to get out. I hoped. "Will you tell him?"

"Anything for you." Adrian swept me a gallant bow. "Although, I still think it's dangerous for you to be involved directly with this."

"I have to do this myself," I said. "I can't hide."

He nodded, as though he understood. I wasn't sure he did.

"Thank you," I told him. "Thank you so much for everything. Now go."

Adrian gave me a crooked grin. "Boy, you don't waste any time kicking a guy out of bed, huh?"

I flinched, the joke hitting a little too close to home. "I want Mikhail to be prepared. And I also need to watch Lissa's last test."

This sobered Adrian. "Does she have a chance? Will she pass?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "This is a tough one."

"Okay. We'll see what we can do." He gave me a small kiss. My lips responded automatically, but my heart wasn't into it. "And Rose? I mean it. Be careful. You're going to be awfully close to Court. Not to mention a bunch of guardians who have you on their most wanted list and will probably try to kill you."

"I know," I said, choosing not to mention that there was no "probably" about it.

With that, he vanished, and I woke. Strangely, what I found in my own world seemed almost more dreamlike than what I'd experienced with Adrian. Dimitri and I were still in bed, snuggled under the covers, our bodies and limbs still wrapped around each other. He slept with that rare peaceful look of his and *almost* seemed to smile. For half a second, I considered waking him and telling him we had to hit the road. A look at the clock happily squashed that thought. We still had time, plus it was getting close to the test. I had to go to Lissa and trusted Sonya would come by if we overslept.

Sure enough, I'd gauged the testing correctly. Lissa was cutting across the Court's lawns, marching like someone going to a funeral. The sun, flowers, and birds were lost on her. Even her company did little to cheer her up: Christian, my mom, and Tasha.

"I can't do this," she said, staring ahead at the building that held her fate. "I can't do this test." The tattoo kept her from giving out any more information.

"You're smart. Brilliant." Christian's arm was around her waist, and in that moment, I loved him for his confidence in her. "You can do it."

"You don't understand," she said, with a sigh. She'd come up with no answers to the riddle, meaning the plan was at stake—and her desire to prove herself.

"For once he does," said Tasha, a slight teasing tone in her voice. "You can do it. You *have* to do it. We have so much riding on it."

Her confidence didn't make Lissa feel better. If anything, it added to the pressure. She would fail, just like in the Council dream the chalice had shown her. She'd had no answer there either.

"Lissa!"

A voice brought them to a halt, and Lissa turned to see Serena running toward them, her long athletic legs quickly covering the distance between them. "Hi Serena," said Lissa. "We can't stop. The test—"

"I know, I know." Serena was flushed, not with exertion, but with anxiety. She proffered a piece of paper. "I made your list. As many as I could remember."

"What list?" asked Tasha.

"Moroi that the queen was having trained, to see how well they could learn fighting."

Tasha's eyebrows rose in surprise. She hadn't been around when they'd discussed it last time. "Tatiana was training fighters? I never heard about anything like that." I had a feeling she would have liked to be one of the ones helping with instruction.

"Most didn't," agreed Lissa, straightening the piece of paper. "It was a big secret."

The group crowded around to read the names, listed in Serena's neat handwriting. Christian let out a low whistle. "Tatiana might have been open to the idea of defense but only for certain people."

"Yes," agreed Tasha. "This is definitely an A-list."

All the names were royal. Tatiana hadn't brought in "commoners" for her experiment. This was the elite of the elite, though as Ambrose had noted, Tatiana had gone out of her way to get a variety of ages and genders.

"Camille Conta?" asked Lissa in surprise. "Never saw that coming. She was always really bad in P.E."

"And there's another of our cousins," added Christian, pointing to *Lia Ozera*. He glanced at Tasha, who was still in disbelief. "Did you know that?"

"No. I wouldn't have guessed her either."

"Half the nominees too," mused Lissa. Rufus Tarus, Ava Drozdov, and Ellis Badica. "Too bad they—oh my God. Adrian's mother?" Sure enough: Daniella Ivashkov.

"Whoa," said Christian. That summed up my reaction too. "Pretty sure Adrian didn't know about that."

"Does she support Moroi fighting?" asked my mom, surprised as well.

Lissa shook her head. "No. From what I know about her, she is definitely in favor of leaving defense to dhampirs." Neither of us could imagine beautiful and proper Daniella Ivashkov in a fight.

"She already hated Tatiana," noted Tasha. "I'm sure this did lovely things for their relationship. Those two bickered all the time behind closed doors."

An uncomfortable silence fell.

Lissa looked at Serena. "Did these people see the queen a lot? Would they have had access to her?"

"Yes," said Serena uneasily. "According to Grant, Tatiana watched every training sessions. After he died . . . she started debriefing with the students individually, to see how well they'd learned." She paused. "I think . . . I think she might have met with some the night she died."

"Had they progressed enough to learn to use a stake?" asked Lissa.

Serena grimaced. "Yes. Some better than others."

Lissa looked back at the list, feeling ill. So much opportunity. So much motivation. Was the answer here on this piece of paper? Was the murderer right before her? Serena had said earlier that Tatiana had purposely picked people resistant to training, probably to see if the obstinate could still learn. Had she gone too far with someone? One name in particular kept scrolling across Lissa's mind.

"I hate to interrupt," said my mother. Her tone and stance indicated sleuth time was over; it was back to business. "We've got to move, or you'll be late."

Lissa realized my mom was right and shoved the piece of paper in her pocket. Being late to the test meant failure. Lissa thanked Serena, reassuring her that this had been the right thing to do. Then, my friends moved away quickly, feeling the press of time as they hurried toward the testing building.

"Damn," muttered Lissa, in a rare show of swearing. "I don't think that old lady'll tolerate any lateness."

"Old lady?" My mother laughed, surprising us all. She could move faster than everyone and was obviously restraining her pace for them. "The one

running most of the tests? You don't know who she is?"

"How would I?" asked Lissa. "I figured she was just someone they recruited."

"Not just someone. That's Ekaterina Zeklos."

"*What*?" Lissa nearly stopped but still had their time crunch in mind. "She was . . . she was the queen before Tatiana, right?"

"I thought she retired to some island," said Christian, just as surprised.

"Not sure if it was an island," said Tasha, "but she did step down when she thought she was too old and went off to live in luxury—and away from politics—once Tatiana was on the throne."

Too old? That had been twenty years ago. No wonder she seemed ancient. "If she was happy to get out of politics, then why is she back?" asked Lissa.

My mother opened the door for all of them when they reached the building, after first peering inside for any threats. It was so instinctual for her that she continued the conversation without missing a beat. "Because it's custom for the last monarch to test the new one—if possible. In this case, it obviously wasn't, so Ekaterina came out of retirement to do her duty."

Lissa could barely believe that she'd been chatting casually with the Moroi's last queen, a very powerful and beloved queen. As soon as her group entered the hallway, Lissa was escorted by guardians and hurried toward the testing room. Their faces showed they hadn't thought she'd make it. Several spectators, also apparently worried, cheered at her appearance giving the usual shouts about Alexandra and the dragons. Lissa had no chance to respond or even say goodbye to her friends before she was practically pushed into the room. The guardians looked relieved.

The door shut, and Lissa found herself staring once more at Ekaterina Zeklos. Seeing the old woman had been intimidating before, but now . . . Lissa's anxiety doubled. Ekaterina gave her a crooked smile.

"I was afraid you wouldn't make it," she said. "Should have known better. You aren't the type to back down."

Lissa was still starstruck and almost felt the need to ramble out an excuse, explaining about Serena's list. But, no. Ekaterina didn't care about that right now, and one didn't make excuses to someone like her anyway, Lissa decided. If you screwed up, you apologized.

"I'm sorry," said Lissa.

"No need to be," said Ekaterina. "You made it. Do you know the answer? What must a queen possess in order to truly rule her people?"

Lissa's tongue felt thick in her mouth. She didn't know the answer. It really was just like the Council dream. Investigating Tatiana's murder had taken so much time. For a strange moment, Lissa's heart burned with sympathy for that prickly queen. She'd done what she thought best for the Moroi and had died for it. Lissa even felt bad now, staring at Ekaterina. This former queen had probably never expected to be taken away from her—island?—retirement and forced back into Court life. Yet, she had come when needed.

And just like that, Lissa suddenly knew the answer.

"Nothing," she said softly. "A queen must possess nothing to rule because she has to give everything she has to her people. Even her life."

The widening of Ekaterina's gap-toothed grin told Lissa she'd answered correctly. "Congratulations, my dear. You've made it through to tomorrow's

vote. I hope you've got a speech ready to win over the Council. You'll have to give it in the morning."

Lissa swayed slightly, not sure what to say now, let alone in a formal speech. Ekaterina seemed to sense how in shock Lissa was, and the smile that always seemed so mischievous turned gentle.

"You'll be fine. You made it this far. The speech is the easy part. Your father would be proud. All the Dragomirs before you would be."

That nearly brought tears to Lissa's eyes, and she shook her head. "I don't know about that. We all know I'm not a real candidate. This was just . . . well, kind of an act." Somehow, she didn't feel bad admitting that in front of Ekaterina. "Ariana's the one who deserves the crown."

Ekaterina's ancient eyes bored into Lissa, and that smiled faded. "You haven't heard then. No, of course you wouldn't have with how quickly this is all happening."

"Heard what?"

Sympathy washed over Ekaterina's face, and later, I'd wonder if that compassion was because of the message she delivered or because of Lissa's reaction.

"Ariana Szelsky didn't pass this test . . . she couldn't solve the riddle . . ."

"Rose, Rose."

Dimitri was shaking me, and it took several seconds for me to shift from being a shocked Lissa to a startled Rose.

"We have to—" he began.

"Oh my God," I interrupted. "You will not *believe* what I just saw."

He went rigid. "Is Lissa okay?"

"Yeah, fine, but—"

"Then we'll worry about that later. Right now, we have to leave."

I noticed then that he was fully dressed while I was still naked. "What's going on?"

"Sonya came by—don't worry." The shock that my face must have shown made him smile. "I got dressed and didn't let her come in. But she said the front desk called. They're starting to realize we had an unusual check-in. We need to get out of here."

Midnight. We had to meet Mikhail at midnight and get the last piece of the mystery that consumed us. "No problem," I said, tossing the covers off me. As I did, I saw Dimitri's eyes on me, and I was kind of surprised at the admiration and hunger I saw there. Somehow, even after sex, I'd kind of expected him to be detached and wear his guardian face—particularly considering our sudden urgency to leave.

"You see something you like?" I asked, echoing something I'd said to him long ago, when he'd caught me in a compromising position at school.

"Lots," he said.

The emotion burning in those eyes was too much for me. I looked away, my heart pounding in my chest as I pulled my clothes on. "Don't forget," I said softly. "Don't forget . . ." I couldn't finish, but there was no need.

"I know, Roza. I haven't forgotten."

I slipped on my shoes, wishing I was weaker and would let my ultimatum slide. I couldn't, though. No matter what had passed between us verbally and

physically, no matter how close we were to our fairy-tale ending . . . there was no future until he could forgive himself.

Sonya and Jill were ready and waiting when we emerged from our room, and something told me Sonya knew what had happened between Dimitri and me. Damned auras. Or maybe you didn't need magical powers to see that kind of thing. Maybe the afterglow just naturally showed on someone's face.

"I need you to make a charm," I told Sonya, once we were on the road. "And we have to stop in Greenston."

"Greenston?" asked Dimitri. "What for?"

"It's where the Alchemists are being held." I had already started slinging the pieces together. Who hated Tatiana—both because of her personality and for having Ambrose? Who resented her wanting Moroi to fight Strigoi? Who feared her endorsing spirit and its dangerous effects on people, say, like Adrian? Who wanted to see a different family on the throne to support new beliefs? And who would be happy to have me locked away and out of the picture? I took a deep breath, scarcely believing what I was about to say.

"And it's where we're going to find proof that Daniella Ivashkov murdered Tatiana."

THIRTY-ONE

I WASN'T THE ONLY ONE who had come to that startling conclusion. When the Moroi Court woke up several hours into our road trip, Lissa was also putting all the pieces together in her room as she prepared herself to give her pre-election speech. She'd thought of all the arguments I had, plus a few more—like how frantic Daniella had been that Adrian might be implicated with me, which would undoubtedly unravel a carefully laid out plan. There was also Daniella's offer of having her lawyer cousin, Damon Tarus, defend me. Would that have actually helped? Or would Damon have subtly worked to weaken my defense? Abe's uncouth involvement might have been a blessing.

Lissa's heart pounded rapidly as she twisted her hair into a chignon. She preferred it down but thought for the coming event, she should put on a more dignified look. Her dress was matte ivory silk, long-sleeved and ruched, about knee length. Some might have thought wearing that color would make her look bridal, but when I saw her in the mirror, I knew no one would make that mistake. She looked luminous. Radiant. Queenly.

"It can't be true," she said, completing the look with pearl earrings that had belonged to her mother. She had shared her theory with Christian and Janine, who were with her now, and had half hoped they'd tell her she was crazy. They hadn't.

"It makes sense," said Christian, with none of his usual snark.

"There's just no proof quite yet," my mother said, ever practical. "Lots of circumstantial stuff."

"Aunt Tasha's checking with Ethan to see if Daniella was there the night of the murder," said Christian. He made a slight face, still not happy about his aunt having a boyfriend. "Daniella wasn't on the official lists, but Aunt Tasha's worried some things might have been altered."

"That wouldn't surprise me. Even so, putting Daniella there at the right time builds the case but still isn't hard proof." My mother should have been an attorney. She and Abe could have opened a law firm together.

"It's as much proof as they've got for Rose!" exclaimed Lissa.

"Aside from the stake," Janine reminded her. "And people are more willing to believe sketchy evidence about Rose than Lady Daniella Ivashkov."

Lissa sighed, knowing it was all true. "If only Abe could talk to the Alchemists. We need what they know."

"He'll do it," said my mother confidently. "It'll just take time."

"We don't have time!" The dramatic turn of events was giving spirit a nice

chance to raise its ugly head, and like always, I tried to pull the darkness from Lissa. You'd think I would have learned my lesson after Victor, but well . . . old habits died hard. *They come first.* "Marie Conta and Rufus Tarus are the only candidates left! If he wins, Daniella's going to have a lot of influence. We'll never prove Rose is innocent then."

Ariana failing the last test had come as a huge blow to everyone, smashing a future Lissa had thought was set in stone. Without Ariana, the outcome didn't look good. Marie Conta wasn't Lissa's favorite person, but Lissa felt she'd make a much better ruler than Rufus. Unfortunately, the Conta family had been quiet in politics in recent years, giving them fewer allies and friends. The numbers were leaning dangerously toward Rufus. It was frustrating. If we could get Jill there, Lissa could vote, and on a Council of twelve, even one vote would be powerful.

"We have time," my mom said calmly. "There'll be no vote today, not with the controversy you'll cause. And for every day the election is delayed, we have another chance to build our case. We're close. We can do it."

"We can't tell Adrian about this," warned Lissa, moving toward the door. It was time to go.

Christian's trademark smirk returned. "That," he said, "is something we can all agree on."

The elaborate ballroom—yet again made a Council room for size reasons—looked like a rock concert. People were fighting for spots inside. Some, realizing that was futile, had camped outside the building, picnic style. Someone had thankfully had the brilliant idea to hook up a sound system with outdoor speakers so that those who didn't make it in could still hear the proceedings. Guardians moved through the crowds, trying to contain the chaos—particularly as the candidates arrived.

Marie Conta had shown up just before Lissa, and even if she was the least-likely candidate, there were still roars and surges of excitement in the crowd. Guardians hastily—and roughly, if necessary—held the mob back so she could pass. That attention had to be scary, but Marie didn't show it. She walked proudly, smiling at supporters and non-supporters alike. Both Lissa and I recalled Christian's words: *You're a queenly nominee. Act like it. You deserve this. You're the last Dragomir. A daughter of royalty.*

And that was exactly how she behaved. It was more than Christian's urging, too. Now that she'd passed all three tests, the gravity of the ancient procedure she was entering continued to grow. Lissa walked in, her head held high. I couldn't see her whole body, but I recognized the feel of her walk: graceful, stately. The crowd loved it, and it occurred to me that this group was particularly vocal because most weren't royal. Those gathered outside were ordinary Moroi, the ones who had come to truly love her. "Alexandra's heir!" "Bring back the dragon!" For some, it was simply enough to shout her name, adding on the titles of an old Russian folktale heroine who shared the same name: "Vasilisa the brave! Vasilisa the beautiful!"

I knew no one would guess the fear she felt inside. She was that good. Christian and my mother, who had initially flanked her, fell back as one, letting Lissa walk a couple steps ahead. There was no question of Lissa's position and authority. She took each step with confidence, remembering that

her grandfather had also walked this path. She tried to give the crowd a smile that was both dignified but genuine. It must have worked because they went even wilder. And when she paused to comment on a dragon banner a man had painted in support, the artist nearly passed out that someone like her would notice and compliment him.

"This is unprecedented," remarked my mom, once they'd safely made it inside. "There's never been this sort of turnout. There certainly wasn't during the last election."

"Why so great this time?" asked Lissa, who was trying to get her breathing under control.

"Because there's so much sensation, between the murder and you muddling the law. That and . . . well, the way you're winning the hearts of every non-royal out there. The dhampirs too. There's a dragon sign in one of our coffee rooms, you know. I even think some of the royals love you, though maybe it's just to spite whatever family they're feuding with. But seriously? If this were up to all of the people and not just the Council—and well, if it was a vote you were eligible for—I think you'd win."

Lissa grimaced but then reluctantly added, "Honestly? I think we *should* have popular votes for our leaders. Every Moroi should cast a vote, not just a handful of elite families."

"Careful there, princess," teased Christian, putting his arm through hers. "That's the kind of talk that'll start another revolution. One at a time, okay?"

The ballroom's crowd wasn't as crazy as the outside one had been—but was pretty close. The guardians were ready for the numbers this time and had made sure to keep strict control from the very beginning. They kept a tight count of how many were allowed in the room and stopped royal and non-royal squabbles. It was still intimidating, and Lissa reminded herself over and over that playing this role was helping me. For me, she would endure anything, even the fanfare. This time, fortunately, Lissa was swept up pretty quickly to the room's front, to where three chairs facing the crowd had been set up for the candidates. Rufus and Marie were already seated, speaking in low voices to a few select family members. Guardians stood around them. Lissa sat alone, of course, but nodded to nearby guards when Tasha approached.

Tasha crouched beside Lissa, speaking low and keeping a wary eye on Rufus as he talked to someone. "Bad news. Well, depending on how you look at it. Ethan says Daniella was there that night. She and Tatiana met alone. He didn't realize it hadn't been put on the records. Someone else wrote those up on behalf of all the guards on duty, but he swears he saw Daniella himself."

Lissa winced. Secretly, she'd been hoping—praying, even—that she'd made a mistake, that surely Adrian's mother couldn't have done this. She gave a swift nod to show she understood.

"I'm sorry," said Tasha. "I know you liked her."

"I think I'm more worried about Adrian. I don't know how he'll take it."

"Hard," said Tasha bluntly. After what she'd faced with Christian's parents, she knew better than anyone else what it was like to have family betray you. "But he'll make it through. And as soon as we can put all this evidence forward, we'll have Dimitri and Rose back."

Those words filled Lissa with hope, strengthening her. "I miss her so much,"

she said. "I wish she was here already."

Tasha gave her a sympathetic smile and patted her shoulder. "Soon. They'll be back soon. Just get through this for now. You can do this. You can change everything."

Lissa wasn't so sure about that, but Tasha hurried off to join her "activist friends" and was replaced by—Daniella.

She'd come to talk to Rufus, offering support and family love. Lissa couldn't bear to look at the older woman and felt even worse when Daniella spoke to her.

"I'm not sure how you got involved with this, dear, but good luck." Daniella's smile seemed sincere, but there was no question which candidate she supported. Her kindly expression turned to concern. "Have you seen Adrian? I thought for sure he'd be here. I know the guardians would let him in."

Excellent question. Lissa hadn't seen him in the last day or so. "I haven't. Maybe he's just running late. Doing his hair or something." *Hopefully not passed out somewhere.*

Daniella sighed. "I hope so."

She left, taking a seat in the audience. Once again, Adrian's father was running the session, and after several false starts, the room quieted.

"In the last week," Nathan began, speaking into a microphone, "many worthy candidates have taken the tests required to rule our people. Before us sit the final three: Rufus Tarus, Marie Conta, and Vasilisa Dragomir." Nathan's tone sounded displeased over that last one, but thus far, the law would let her give her speech. After that, the law's inconsistency kicked in, and all hell would break loose.

"These three have shown they have the ability to rule, and as their last act, before we vote, each will speak about their plans for our people."

Rufus was up first, delivering exactly the kind of speech I'd expected. He played on Moroi fears, promising extreme forms of protection—most of which involved dhampirs but didn't get into much detail.

"Our safety must be our top priority," he proclaimed. "At all costs. Will it be difficult? Yes. Will there be sacrifices? Yes. But aren't our children worth it? Don't we care about them?" Bringing children into it was just low, I decided. At least he'd left puppies out.

He also used dirty politician tricks, slandering his rivals. Marie was mostly slammed for her family's lack of activity. Lissa, however, was a great target. He pushed her age, the danger of spirit, and the fact that her being there in the first place was a violation of the law.

Marie's speech was much more thoughtful and detailed. She laid out very explicit plans on all sorts of issues, most of which were reasonable. I didn't agree with all she said, but she was clearly competent and didn't lower herself to mocking her competition. Unfortunately, she wasn't nearly as charismatic as Rufus, and it was a sad truth that that could make a big difference. Her monotone closing summed up not only her speech but also her personality.

"Those are the reasons why I should be queen. I hope you enjoyed this talk and will vote for me when the time comes. Thank you." She abruptly sat down.

Lissa's turn came at last. Standing before her microphone, she suddenly saw the chalice's dream, where she'd faltered in front of the Council. But no, this was reality. She wouldn't fail. She would go forward.

"We're a people at war," she began, voice loud and clear. "We're constantly attacked—but not just by Strigoi. By one another. We're divided. We fight with one another. Family against family. Royal against non-royal. Moroi against dhampir. *Of course* the Strigoi are picking us off. They're at least united behind a goal: killing."

If I had been sitting there in that audience, I would have been leaning forward, mouth open. As it was, there were plenty of people there to do it for me. Her words were volatile. Shocking. And utterly captivating.

"We are one people," she continued. "Moroi and dhampir alike." Yeah, that got some gasps too. "And while it's impossible for every single person to get their way, no one will get anything done if we don't come together and find ways to meet in the middle—even if it means making hard choices."

Then, extraordinarily, she explained how it could be done. True, she didn't have the time to give fine details on every single issue in our world, but she hit a lot of the big ones. And she managed to do it in a way that didn't offend anyone *too* badly. After all, she was right in saying not everyone could get their way. Still, she spoke about how the dhampirs were our best warriors—and would be better with a stronger voice. She spoke about how non-royals needed a greater voice too—but not at the cost of losing the exalted royal lines that defined our people. Finally, in addressing the issue of training Moroi to defend themselves, she did emphasize its importance—but not as something mandatory and not as the only method needing to be explored.

Yes, she gave something to everyone and did it beautifully and charismatically. It was the kind of speech that could make people follow her anywhere. She concluded with, "We have always mixed the old with the new. We've kept magic alongside technology. We conduct these sessions with scrolls and—with these." She smiled and tapped her microphone. "That's how we have survived. We hold onto our pasts and embrace our present. We take the best of it all and grow stronger. That's how we have survived. That's how we *will* survive."

Silence met her conclusion—and then the cheers began. I actually heard the roar from outside on the lawn before it started within. People I would have sworn supported others were practically in tears, and I hadn't forgotten that most of the people I had visuals on in this room were royal. Lissa herself wanted to burst into tears but instead took her due bravely. When she finely sat down, and the crowd quieted, Nathan resumed his role.

"Well," he said. "That was a very pretty speech, one we all enjoyed. But now, the time has come for the Council to vote on our next leader, and—by law—only two candidates stand ready for that position: Rufus Tarus and Marie Conta." Two Moroi, one each from the Tarus and Conta families, came forward to join their respective candidates. Nathan's gaze fell on Lissa who had risen like the others but stood alone. "According to the election laws—laws set down since the beginning of time—each candidate must approach the Council, escorted by someone of their bloodline in order to show family strength and unity. Do you have any such person?"

Lissa met his eyes unflinchingly. "No, Lord Ivashkov."

"Then I'm afraid your part in this game is over, Princess Dragomir." He smiled. "You may sit down now."

Yup. That's when all hell broke loose.

I'd always heard the expression, "And the crowd goes wild!" Now, I saw it in the flesh. Half the time, I couldn't even keep track of who was shouting or supporting what. People argued in clusters and one-on-one. A couple of Moroi in jeans challenged every well-dressed person they could find, operating under the irrational assumptions that anyone in nice clothes must be royal and that all royals hated Lissa. Their devotion to her was admirable. Creepy, but admirable. One group from the Tarus family stood face to face with a Conta group, looking prepared for either a gang fight or a dance-off. That was one of the most bizarre pairings of all since those two families were the only ones who should be in complete agreement on anything.

On and on it went. People fought about whether Lissa should be eligible for the vote. They fought about having a session to change the law books right at that moment. Some fought over things I'd never even heard of before. A rush of guardians to the door made me think the outside crowd was trying to break in. My mother was among that defense, and I knew she'd been right: there'd be no vote today, not with this anarchy. They'd have to close the session and try again tomorrow.

Lissa stared at the crowd, feeling numb and unable to keep up with all the activity. Her stomach twisted as something dawned on her. All this time, she'd sworn that she'd respect the dignity of the election tradition. Yet, it was because of her that things were now anything but dignified. It was all her fault. Then, her eyes fell on someone sitting in a back corner, far from the pandemonium. Ekaterina Zeklos. The old former queen caught Lissa's eye—and winked.

I faded out of that room, not needing to see any more of the arguing. I returned to the car ride, a new thought in my head. Lissa's words burned in my soul. They had stirred my heart. And even if she'd given her speech as a decoy, there had been passion in them—ardent belief. If she had been eligible to be queen, she would have stood behind those words.

And that's when I knew. She *would* be queen.

I decided then and there that I would make it happen. We wouldn't bring Jill simply to give Lissa her Council vote. Jill would give Lissa the status that would allow Moroi to vote *for her*. And Lissa would win.

Naturally, I kept these thoughts to myself.

"That's a dangerous look," said Dimitri, giving me a brief glance before returning his eyes to the road.

"What look?" I asked innocently.

"The one that says you just got some idea."

"I didn't just get an idea. I got a *great* idea."

Jokes like that used to make Jill laugh, but turning to look at her in the backseat showed me she didn't find much funny at all.

"Hey, you okay?" I asked.

Those jade eyes focused on me. "I'm not sure. A lot's kind of happened. And I don't really get what's going to happen next. I feel like . . . like some kind of

object that's going to be used in someone's master plan. Like a pawn."

A bit of guilt tugged at me. Victor had always used people as part of a game. Was I any different? No. I cared about Jill. "You're not an object or a pawn," I told her. "But you're very, very important, and because of you, a lot of good things are going to happen."

"It won't be that simple though, will it?" She sounded wise beyond her years. "Things are going to get worse before they get better, aren't they?"

I couldn't lie to her. "Yeah. But then you'll get to contact your mom . . . and well, like I said, good things will happen. Guardians always say 'They come first' when we're talking about Moroi. It's not exactly the same for you, but in doing this . . . well . . ."

She gave me a smile that didn't seem very happy. "Yeah, I get it. It's for the greater good, right?"

Sonya had spent a lot of the ride working on a charm for me, using a silver bracelet we'd bought at a roadside gift shop. It was tacky-looking but made of real silver, which was what counted. When we were about a half hour from Greenston, she deemed it finished and handed it over. I slipped it on and looked at the others.

"Well?"

"I don't see anything," said Sonya, "but then, I wouldn't."

Jill squinted. "You seem a little blurry . . . like I just need to blink a few times."

"Same here," said Dimitri.

Sonya was pleased. "That's how it should look to people who know she's got a charm on. Hopefully, to the other guardians, she'll be wearing a different face." It was a variation of what Lissa had made when we'd busted Victor out of prison. Only, this required less magic because Sonya only had to slightly alter my features and didn't need to obscure my race. She was also more practiced than Lissa.

The restaurant I'd chosen in Greenston had long since closed when we rolled in at eleven thirty. The parking lot was nearly black, but I could make out a car in the back corner. Hopefully, it was Mikhail having gotten there early—and not a guardian hit squad.

But when we parked nearby, I saw that it was indeed Mikhail who got out of the car—along with Adrian.

He grinned when he saw me, pleased at the surprise. Really, I should have seen this coming when I'd told him to pass the message on to Mikhail. Adrian would have found a way to come along. My stomach rolled. No, no. Not this. I had no time to deal with my love life. Not now. I didn't even know what to say to Adrian. Fortunately, I wasn't given the chance to speak.

Mikhail had come striding toward us with guardian efficiency, ready to find out what task I had in mind. He came to a screeching halt when he saw Sonya get out of our car. So did she. They both stood frozen, eyes wider than seemed physically possible. I knew then that the rest of us had ceased to exist, as had all our intrigue, missions, and . . . well, the world. In that moment, only the two of them existed.

Sonya gave a strangled cry and then ran forward. This jolted him awake, in time to wrap her in his arms as she threw herself against him. She started

crying, and I could see tears on his face too. He brushed her hair back and cupped her cheeks, staring down at her and repeating over and over, "It's you . . . it's you . . . it's you . . ."

Sonya tried to wipe her eyes, but it didn't do much good. "Mikhail—I'm sorry—I'm so sorry—"

"It doesn't matter." He kissed her and pulled back only enough to look into her eyes. "It doesn't matter. Nothing matters except that we're together again."

This made her cry harder. She buried her face against his chest, and his arms tightened more fiercely around her. The rest of us stood as frozen as the lovers had been earlier. It felt wrong witnessing this. It was too private; we shouldn't have been there. Yet . . . at the same time, I just kept thinking that this was how I'd imagined my reunion with Dimitri would be when Lissa had restored him. Love. Forgiveness. Acceptance.

Dimitri and I briefly locked eyes, and an uncanny sense told me he was recalling my words: *You have to forgive yourself. If you can't, then you can't go on either. We can't.* I glanced away from him, looking back at the happy couple so that he wouldn't see me tear up. God, I wanted what Mikhail and Sonya had. A happy ending. Forgiveness of the past. A bright future ahead.

Jill sniffled beside me, and I put an arm around her. That small sound seemed to draw Mikhail back to our world. Still holding Sonya, he looked over at me.

"Thank you. Thank you for this. Anything you need. Anything at all—"

"Stop, stop," I said, afraid I might choke up. I'd only just managed to blink away traitorous tears. "I'm glad . . . glad to have done it, and well . . . it wasn't really me at all."

"Still . . ." Mikhail looked down at Sonya who was smiling at him through her tears. "You've given me my world back."

"I'm so happy for you . . . and I want you to have this, to just enjoy this right now. But I have a favor. One more favor."

Sonya and Mikhail exchanged glances in a knowing way. You never would have guessed they'd been apart for three years. She nodded, and he returned his gaze to me. "I figured that's why he brought me here." He inclined his head toward Adrian.

"I need you to get me into the hotel where the Alchemists are staying."

The small smile on Mikhail's face dropped. "Rose . . . I can't get you into any place. You being this close to Court is dangerous enough."

I pulled the bracelet from my pocket. "I'll have a disguise. They won't know it's me. Is there a reason you'd have to see the Alchemists?"

Sonya stayed in his arms, but his eyes were dark with thought. "They'll have guardians near their rooms. We could probably pass ourselves off as relief."

Dimitri nodded in agreement. "If it's too different from their scheduled shift change, it'll raise eyebrows . . . but hopefully you'll have long enough to get in and find out what you need. The guardians are probably more worried about the Alchemists getting out than other guardians getting in."

"Absolutely," said Mikhail. "So it's you and me, Rose?"

"Yup," I said. "The fewer, the better. Just enough to question Sydney and Ian. I guess everyone else waits here."

Sonya kissed his cheek. "I'm not going anywhere."

Adrian had strolled over by now and given Jill a light, brotherly punch in the arm. "And I'm going to stay and hear how on earth you got involved with this, Jailbait."

Jill mustered a smile for him. She had a pretty hardcore crush on him, and it was a sign of her stress that she didn't blush and go all weak-kneed. They started a conversation, and Dimitri gestured for me to follow him around the car, out of sight.

"This is dangerous," he said quietly. "If that charm fails, you probably aren't going to get out of that hotel." There was an unspoken *alive* at the end of his words.

"It won't fail. Sonya's good. Besides, if we're caught, maybe they'll bring me back to Court instead of killing me. Imagine how much *that* will slow the elections."

"Rose, I'm serious."

I caught hold of his hand. "I know, I know. This'll be easy. We should be in and out in under an hour, but if we aren't . . ." Man, I hated grim contingencies. "If we aren't, then send Adrian to Court with Jill, and you and Sonya hide out somewhere until . . . I don't know."

"Don't worry about us," he said. "You just be careful." He leaned down and pressed a kiss to my forehead.

"Little dhampir, are you—"

Adrian came strolling around the car, just in time to see that small kiss. I dropped my hand from Dimitri's. None of us said anything, but in that moment, Adrian's eyes . . . well, I saw his whole world come crashing apart. I felt sicker than if a fleet of Strigoi were around. I felt worse than a Strigoi. *Honor*, I thought. For real: the guardians should have taught it. Because I hadn't learned it.

"Let's hurry," said Mikhail, walking over, oblivious to the drama that had just exploded beside him. "Sonya says you guys have a ticking clock at Court too."

I swallowed, dragging my eyes from Adrian. My heart twisted within my chest. "Yeah . . ."

"Go," said Dimitri.

"Remember," I murmured to him. "Talking to him is my responsibility. Not yours."

I followed Mikhail to his car, slipping on the charmed bracelet. Before getting inside, I cast a quick glance back. Jill and Sonya were speaking together, Dimitri stood alone, and Adrian was taking out a cigarette, his back to them all.

"I suck," I said dismally, as Mikhail started the car. It was ineloquent but pretty much summed up my feelings.

He didn't respond, probably because it wasn't relevant to our task. Either that, or he was still too wrapped up in the renewal of his own love life. Lucky bastard.

It didn't take long to reach the hotel. There were guardians around, covertly placed so as not to draw human attention. None of them stopped us as we walked inside. One even gave Mikhail a nod of recognition. They all looked at me like . . . well, like they didn't recognize me. Which was good. With so

many guardians helping at Court, new faces were to be expected, and mine didn't look like Rose Hathaway's. No one was concerned.

"Which rooms are they in?" Mikhail asked a guardian who was standing in the lobby. "We're supposed to relieve that shift." Mikhail's manner was perfectly self-assured, enough that the guardian—while a little surprised—seemed to think this must be okay.

"Only two of you? There are four up there."

I saved us on that one. "They want more back at Court. Things are getting out of hand, so just two are being assigned here now."

"Probably all we need up there," agreed the guardian. "Third floor."

"Quick thinking," Mikhail told me in the elevator.

"That was nothing. I've talked myself out of much worse."

The rooms were easy to spot because a guardian stood outside them. *The rest are inside*, I realized, wondering if that would be a problem. But, with that same authoritative attitude, Mikhail told the guy that he and the others had been recalled to Court. The guardian summoned his colleagues—one from each Alchemist's rooms, though we couldn't tell whose was whose—and they gave us a brief status report before leaving, including who was in which room.

When they were gone, Mikhail looked to me. "Sydney," I said.

We'd been given key cards and walked right into Sydney's room. She sat cross-legged on her bed, reading a book and looking miserable. She sighed when she saw us.

"Well, what is it now?"

I took off the bracelet, letting my illusion vanish.

There was no jaw dropping or raised eyebrows from Sydney. Just a knowing look. "I should have guessed. Are you here to free me?" There was a hopeful note in her voice.

"Um, not exactly." I hated that Sydney was going to get punished, but smuggling her out wasn't part of the plan now. "We need to talk to Ian, and it's probably best if you're there. He knows something important. Something we need."

That got the raised eyebrow. She pointed at the door. "They won't let us talk to each other."

"They aren't out there," I said smugly.

Sydney shook her head ruefully. "Rose, you really do scare me sometimes. Just not for the reasons I originally thought you would. Come on. He's next door, but you'll have a hard time getting him to talk."

"That's where you'll help," I said, as we walked into the hall. I slipped the bracelet back on. "He's totally into you. He'll help if you ask."

As I'd guessed, Sydney was completely oblivious to Ian's crush. "What! He does not—"

She shut her mouth as we entered Ian's room. He was watching TV but jumped up when he saw us. "Sydney! Are you okay?"

I shot her a meaningful look.

She gave me a pained one in return and then turned her attention back to Ian. "They need your help with something. Some information."

He turned his gaze on us, and it immediately went colder. "We answered your questions a hundred times."

"Not all of them," I said. "When you were at Court, you saw a picture on the table. Of a dead man. Who was it?"

Ian's lips went into a straight line. "I don't know."

"I saw—er, that is, we know you recognized him," I argued. "You reacted."

"I actually saw that too," admitted Sydney.

His tone turned pleading. "Come *on*, we don't need to help them anymore. This whole hotel-prison thing is bad enough. I'm sick of their games."

I didn't blame him, really, but we needed him too much. I glanced at Sydney beseechingly, telling her that only she could get us through this.

She turned back to Ian. "What's the deal with the guy in the picture? Is it . . . is it really horrible? Something secret?"

He shrugged. "No. I just don't want to help them anymore. It's irrelevant."

"Will you do it for me?" she asked sweetly. "Please? It might help me get out of trouble." Sydney was no master of flirting, but I think just the fact she came close to it astonished him. He hesitated for several moments, glanced at us and then back to her. She smiled at him.

Ian caved. "I meant what I said. I don't know who he is. He was with a Moroi woman over in the St. Louis facility one day."

"Wait," I said, derailed. "Moroi come to your places?"

"Sometimes," said Sydney. "Just like we came to yours. Some meetings happen in person. We don't usually hold your people prisoner, though."

"I think this guy was like her bodyguard or something," Ian said. "She was the one there on business. He just followed and stayed quiet."

"A Moroi bodyguard?"

"Not uncommon for those that can't get guardians," said Mikhail. "Abe Mazur is proof of that. He's got his own army."

"I think of them more as a mafia." My joke aside, I was getting confused. Despite the widespread disdain about learning to fight, sometimes Moroi did have to hire Moroi security because they just couldn't obtain a guardian. Someone like Daniella Ivashkov wouldn't have that problem. In fact, I was pretty sure she'd be entitled to two guardians if she stepped outside protective borders—and she'd made it clear she didn't think Moroi should fight. Why would she travel with Moroi protection when she could have better trained guardians? It made no sense. Still . . . if you'd killed a queen, you probably did all sorts of unorthodox things. They didn't have to make sense. "Who was she?" I asked. "The woman?"

"I didn't know her either," said Ian. "I just passed them while they were on their way to something. A meeting, maybe."

"Do you remember what she looked like?" Something. We needed *something*. This was on the verge of falling apart, but if Ian could identify Daniella, we might just be set.

"Sure," he said. "She's easy to remember."

The ensuing silence irritated me. "So?" I asked. "What did she look like?"

He told me.

The description was not what I had expected.

THIRTY-TWO

SYDNEY AND HER FRIENDS weren't happy that we weren't going to take them with us.

"I would," I told her, still reeling from what I'd learned from Ian. "But getting us in and out has been hard enough! If we step outside with you, we'll all be busted. Besides, soon it won't matter. Once we tell everyone at Court what we know and clear my name, the guardians won't need you anymore."

"It's not the guardians I'm worried about," she replied. She used that blasé tone of hers, but I could see a glint of legitimate fear in her eyes—and I wondered who she was referring to. The Alchemists? Or someone else?

"Sydney," I said hesitantly, despite knowing Mikhail and I needed to get out of there. "What did Abe really do for you? There has to be more than just the transfer."

Sydney gave me a small, sad smile. "It doesn't matter, Rose. I'll deal with whatever comes. Just go now, okay? Go help your friends."

I wanted to say more . . . to find out more. But Mikhail's expression told me he agreed with her, and so, with brief farewells, he and I left. When we got back to where the others were waiting in the parking lot, I saw the situation hadn't changed much. Dimitri was pacing, no doubt restless at being out of the action. Jill still stood near Sonya, as though seeking protection from the older woman, and Adrian stayed away from all of them, barely sparing a glance when Mikhail's car pulled up.

When we told the group what we'd learned, however, *that* got a reaction from Adrian.

"Impossible. I can't believe that." He stamped out a cigarette. "Your Alchemist pals are wrong."

I could hardly believe it either, yet I had no reason to think Ian would lie. And honestly, if Adrian was having a hard time with this, there was no telling what he would have thought if we'd told him who our previous suspect was. I stared off into the night, trying to come to terms with who had murdered Tatiana and framed me. It was hard even for me to believe. Betrayal was harsh.

"The motives are there . . ." I said reluctantly. Once Ian had described whom he'd seen, a dozen reasons for the murder clicked into place. "And they *are* political. Ambrose was right."

"Ian's ID is hard evidence," said Dimitri, as shocked as the rest of us. "But there are a lot of other holes, a lot of pieces that don't fit into it."

"Yeah." One in particular had been bothering me. "Like why *I* was set up for the fall."

No one had an answer for that. "We need to get back to Court," Mikhail said at last. "Or I'm going to be missed."

I cast Jill what I hoped was an encouraging smile. "And you've got to make your debut."

"I don't know which is crazier," said Adrian. "The killer's identity or Jailbait being a Dragomir." His words to me were cold, but the look he gave her was gentle. Crazy as the news was, Adrian hadn't had that hard of a time believing Jill's parentage. He was jaded enough to believe in Eric's infidelity, and those telltale eyes sealed the deal. I think hearing what Ian had told us was hurting Adrian more than he was letting on. Finding out the person responsible for his aunt's murder was someone he knew had to intensify the pain. Finding out about me and Dimitri couldn't help matters either.

Much to Mikhail's dismay, Sonya offered to stay behind while the rest of us went to Court. We couldn't bring both cars, and his only held five. She considered herself the least useful in this endeavor. With much hugging, kissing, and tears, she promised Mikhail they'd see each other again, once this mess was sorted out. I hoped she was right.

My charm would obscure my face enough to get me through the gate. But Jill was a trickier problem. Her kidnapping was hot Moroi news, and if she was recognized by any of the gate guardians, we would be stopped then and there. We were gambling that the guards would be too harried to notice her like they would Dimitri and me. That meant Dimitri took priority for disguising—requiring Adrian's help. Adrian wasn't quite as adept with illusion as Sonya was, but he understood enough of it to make Dimitri's appearance altered to the eyes of others. It was similar to how he'd used spirit during my jail escape. The question was whether or not Adrian would actually do it for us. He hadn't said a word to anyone about what he'd seen between me and Dimitri, but others must have felt the sudden rise in tension.

"We have to help Lissa," I told him, when he didn't respond to the request. "Time's running out. Please. Please help us." I wasn't above groveling, if that was what he needed.

Fortunately, it wasn't. Adrian took a deep breath and closed his eyes for a brief moment. I was certain he wished he had something stronger than cigarettes. At last, he nodded. "Let's go."

We left Sonya with the keys to the second car, and she stood there with shining eyes, watching as we drove off. Dimitri, Mikhail, and I spent most of the journey analyzing the our data collection. The woman Ian had described couldn't have done everything we'd been pinning on the murderer.

I was sitting in the backseat with Adrian and Jill, leaning forward and checking things off on my fingers. "Motive? Yes. Ability? Yes. Paying off Joe? Yes. Access to Tatiana's chambers . . ." I frowned, suddenly thinking of what I'd overheard while with Lissa. "Yes."

This earned me a surprised glance from Dimitri. "Really? That was one piece I couldn't figure out."

"Pretty sure I know how she did it," I said. "But the anonymous letter to Tatiana doesn't make sense. Not to mention obscuring Lissa's family—or trying

to kill her." *Or trying to frame me*.

"We might be dealing with more than one person," said Dimitri.

"Like a conspiracy?" I asked, startled.

He shook his head. "No, I mean, *someone* else had a grudge against the queen. But not someone who'd go as far as to kill her. Two people, two agendas. Probably not even aware of each other. We're mixing up the evidence."

I fell silent, turning over his words. It made sense, and I picked up on the nuance that by *someone*, he meant Daniella. We'd been right about reasons she'd dislike Tatiana—the trainings, the age law not being hardcore enough, encouraging spirit . . . But that hadn't been enough for murder. An angry letter, bribery for her son's safety? Those were the kinds of actions Lady Daniella Ivashkov took. Not staking.

In the ensuing silence, I heard soft words between Jill and Adrian, who'd been having a conversation while the rest of us plotted strategy.

"What do I do?" Jill asked him in a small voice.

His answer was swift and sure. "Act like you deserve to be there. Don't let them intimidate you."

"What about Lissa? What's she going to think of me?"

Adrian hesitated only a moment. "Doesn't matter. Just act the way I told you."

My stomach sank, listening to him give her such earnest, kind advice. Rowdy, smug, and flippant . . . he was all those things. But his heart was good. The heart I'd just broken. I knew I was right about his potential. Adrian was great. He could do great things. I just hoped I hadn't set him back. At least I hadn't had to tell him his mother was a murderer . . . but still.

All of us grew quiet when we reached the gate. The line of cars was still there, and we became more and more nervous as we crept forward. A flip to Lissa's mind told me we weren't missing anything in the Council. The chaotic situation was pretty much the same as before, though the exasperated look on Nathan's face made me think he'd call a close to proceedings soon and continue tomorrow. I wasn't sure if that was good or bad.

The guardians recognized Mikhail, of course, and while still vigilant, their initial instincts didn't suspect him of nefarious deeds. He vaguely said he'd been sent to pick up some people. The guardian looking in the car scanned over Dimitri, me, and—thankfully—Jill. Adrian, a well-known figure, got us added respect. After a mandatory check of the trunk, we were sent on through.

"Oh my God. It worked," I breathed, as Mikhail drove over to the guardians' parking area.

"Now what?" asked Jill.

"Now we reestablish the Dragomir line and call out a murderer," I said.

"Oh, is that all?" Adrian's sarcasm was palpable.

"You know," remarked Mikhail, "that the instant your illusions are dropped, you two are going to be jumped by guardians and thrown back into jail. Or worse."

Dimitri and I exchanged looks. "We know," I said, trying to ignore the memories of that terrible, claustrophobic experience. "But if everything works

out . . . we won't have to stay there for long. They'll use what we've found out and then eventually set us free." I sounded more optimistic than I felt.

Once parked, our party headed toward the ballroom's building, which could have been seen miles away with all the people around it. How strange. Not long ago, I'd made this same journey, with nearly the same people, hurrying *away* from Court. We'd worn spirit disguises then, too, and had been seeking escape. Now we were knowingly walking into peril. I was convinced if I could make it in undetected and deliver my news, everything would work out. Sonya's charm had worked perfectly when I saw the Alchemists. I had no reason to doubt it, but the fear still lurked in the back of my mind: what if it stopped functioning? What if the disguise failed and I was spotted before even getting into the building? Would they arrest me? Or would they simply shoot first?

The doors were barred to spectators, but guardians were allowed access, so once again Mikhail talked us in—using a sullen Adrian as the reason. The late queen's nephew could hardly be refused, and with the chaos inside, more guardians—which Dimitri and I appeared to be—were welcome. Adrian kept an arm around Jill as they entered, and the guardians let her pass.

We slipped into the ballroom, completely unnoticed. I'd seen the arguing through Lissa's eyes, but it was totally different in person. Louder. More grating. My friends and I exchanged looks. I'd braced myself for a big confrontation with the audience—hell, it wouldn't be the first time—but this was a test of even my skills.

"We need someone to get the room's attention," I said. "Someone not afraid to make a spectacle—I mean, besides me, of course."

"Mikhail? Where have you been?"

We turned and saw Abe standing before us.

"Well, speak of the devil," I said. "Exactly what we need."

Abe peered at me and frowned. Charms could be seen through when others knew one was being used. Charms were also less effective if others knew the wearer well. It was how Victor had recognized me in Tarasov. Sonya's was too strong for Abe to fully break through, but he could tell something wasn't right.

"What's going on?" he demanded.

"The usual, old man," I replied cheerily. "Danger, insane plans . . . you know, the stuff that runs in our family."

He squinted his eyes again, still unable to fully see through the charm. I was probably blurry. "Rose? Is that you? Where have you been?"

"We need the room's attention," I said. I wondered if this was what it felt like when parents busted their kids for breaking curfew. He looked very disapproving. "We've got a way to settle this whole argument."

"Well," observed Adrian dryly, "we've at least got a way to start another one."

"I trusted you at my hearing," I told Abe. "Can't you trust me now?"

Abe's expression turned wry. "You apparently didn't trust me enough to stay put in West Virginia."

"Technicalities," I said. "Please. We need this."

"And we're short on time," added Dimitri.

Abe studied him too. "Let me guess. Belikov?" There was uncertainty in my

father's voice—Adrian was doing a good job in keeping the illusion over Dimitri—but Abe was clever enough to deduce who would be with me.

"Dad, we have to hurry. We've got the killer—and we've got Lissa's . . ." How did I explain it? "A chance to change Lissa's life."

Not much startled Abe, but I think my earnest use of "Dad" did. Scanning the room, his eyes landed on someone, and he gave a small jerk of his head. Several seconds later, my mother squeezed her way through to us. Great. He called; she came. They were awfully chummy lately. I hoped Lissa remained the only one with a surprise sibling.

"Who are these people?" my mother asked.

"Guess," replied Abe flatly. "Who would be foolish enough to break into Court after escaping it?"

My mom's eyes widened. "How—"

"No time," Abe said. The sharp look he got in return said she didn't like being interrupted. Maybe no siblings after all. "I have a feeling half the guardians in this room are going to be all over us soon. Are you ready for that?"

My poor, law-abiding mother looked pained, realizing what was being asked of her. "Yes."

"Me too," added Mikhail.

Abe studied us all. "I guess there are worse odds."

He headed up to where Nathan Ivashkov was leaning against his podium. He looked weary and defeated—and utterly at a loss on what to do with the mess before him. At our approach, the monarch candidates glanced over curiously, and I sensed a sudden jolt of surprise through the bond. Lissa could see right through the spirit charms. I felt her breath catch at the sight of us. Fear, shock, and relief played through her. And confusion, of course. She was so glad to see us that she forgot all about the elections and started to stand at our approach. I gave her a quick shake of my head, urging her to keep our cover, and after a moment's hesitation, she sat back down. She was worried and puzzled—but trusted me.

Nathan came to life when he saw us, particularly when Abe simply shoved him out of the way and grabbed the microphone. "Hey, what are you—"

I expected Abe to yell for everyone to shut up or something like that. Of course, Nathan had been trying that for a while with no results. So, I was quite shocked—as was everyone else—when Abe put fingers to his lips and let out the most ear-piercing whistle I had ever heard. A whistle like that through a microphone? Yeah. It hurt my ears. It had to be worse for the Moroi, and the screeching feedback in the speakers didn't help.

The room quieted enough for him to be heard. "Now that you have the sense to keep your mouths shut," said Abe, "we have . . . some things to say." He was using his confident, I-control-the-world voice, but I knew he was taking a lot on faith here. "Act fast," he muttered, extending the microphone out to us.

I took it and cleared my throat. "We're here to, uh, settle this debate once and for all." That brought grumbles, and I hurried on loudly before the room erupted again. "The laws can stay the way they are. Vasilisa Dragomir is entitled to her Council vote—and eligible to be a full candidate for the throne. There's another member in her family. She isn't the only Dragomir left."

Murmurs and whispers broke out, though it was nothing like the roar earlier—most likely because the Moroi loved intrigue, and they had to know how this would play out. In my periphery, I could see guardians forming a very loose perimeter around us. Their concern was security, not scandal.

I beckoned Jill forward. For a moment, she froze; then I wondered if she recalled Adrian's words in the car. She stepped beside me, so pale that I worried she might pass out. I almost felt like I could too. The tension and pressure were overwhelming. No. I'd come too far.

"This is Jillian Mastrano Dragomir. She's Eric Dragomir's illegitimate daughter—but she *is* his daughter and officially part of the bloodline." I hated using *illegitimate*, but in this case, it was a necessary fact.

In the heartbeat of silence that followed, Jill hastily leaned toward me and the microphone. "I *am* a Dragomir," she said clearly, despite her trembling hands. "Our family has its quorum, and my s-sister has all her rights."

I could see another explosion building, and Abe jumped in between Jill and me, grabbing the microphone. "For those who don't believe this, a DNA test will clear up any doubts about her lineage." I had to admire Abe's audacity. He had only learned this information sixty seconds ago and was already advocating it with certainty, as though he himself had performed the necessary tests back in his home genetics lab. More faith—and an advantage he couldn't pass up. My old man loved secrets.

The news triggered the reaction I'd expected. Once the audience had processed the information, a flurry of shouted commentary began.

"Eric Dragomir didn't have any other children, illegitimate or not!"

"This is a scam!"

"Show us the proof! Where are your tests?"

"Well . . . he was kind of a flirt . . ."

"He *did* have another daughter."

That last one shut the crowd up, both because it was spoken with authority and because it came from Daniella Ivashkov. She had stood up, and even without a microphone, she had a voice that could carry in a room. She was also an important enough person in our society to draw attention. Many among the royals were practically conditioned to listen to her. In the now quiet room, Daniella continued speaking.

"Eric Dragomir had an illegitimate daughter, with a woman named Emily Mastrano—a dancer, if I recall correctly. He wanted it kept secret and needed certain things done—things he couldn't do himself—to help with that. I was one of the few who helped." An uncharacteristically bitter smile turned up her lips. "And honestly, I wouldn't have minded it staying secret either."

Pieces clicked in my head. I knew now who had broken into the Alchemists' records. And why. In the room's silence, I didn't need a microphone to respond either.

"Enough that you'd make certain papers disappear."

Daniella fixed that smile on me. "Yes."

"Because if the Dragomirs faded, spirit might too. And Adrian would be safe. Spirit was getting too much attention too fast, and you needed to get rid of any evidence about Jill to kill Vasilisa's credibility." Daniella's expression confirmed as much. I should have left it at that, but my curiosity wouldn't

allow it. "Then why admit it now?"

Daniella shrugged. "Because you're right. One DNA test will show the truth." There were gasps of awe from those who took her word as gospel and wondered what this meant. Others people refused to believe and wore looks of scorn. Daniella, undoubtedly disappointed the truth had leaked, nonetheless seemed resigned and willing to accept it. But her smile soon dropped as she studied me more closely. "What I'd like to know is: who in the world are *you*?"

A good portion of the audience appeared to want to know this as well. I hesitated. Sonya's charmed disguise had gotten me pretty far at this point. We had a fragile acceptance of Jill and the Dragomir line. If we let the system run its course, and if Lissa won like I now wanted—I'd have a queenly advocate to help in the case to clear me.

But staring at the crowd—full of people I'd known and respected and who had still condemned me without question—I felt anger burn within me. Spirit-induced or not, it didn't matter. I was still outraged at how easily I'd been accused and tossed away. I didn't want to wait for this to be settled in some quiet guardian office. I wanted to face them. I wanted them to know I was innocent—of killing the queen, at least.

And so, surpassing my own records for dangerous, reckless behavior, I ripped off Sonya's bracelet.

"I'm Rose Hathaway."

THIRTY-THREE

Many eyes also went to Dimitri. Adrian had dropped that illusion too, once I'd shed mine. And, as we'd been expecting, the guardians who had been gradually taking up position around us surged forward, armed with handguns. I still thought that was cheating. Fortunately, my mother and Mikhail moved quickly into place to block our attackers and deter any gunshots.

CRIES AND SCREAMS FROM THE audience told me my disguise was gone.

"Don't," I snapped at Dimitri, who I knew was probably about to join our two defenders. It was crucial he and I stay perfectly still, so we weren't taken as threats. I even went as far as to hold up my arms, and—reluctantly, I suspected—Dimitri did too. "Wait. Please listen to us first."

The guardian circle was tight, with no gaps. I was pretty sure my mom and Mikhail were the only thing keeping them from shooting us then and there. Guardians would always avoid fighting other guardians if possible. Two blockers were easy to take down, though, and these guardians wouldn't wait forever. Jill and Abe suddenly moved forward, taking positions next to us. More shields. I saw one of the looming guardians grimace. Civilians complicated things. Adrian had not moved, but the fact that he was enclosed in the circle at all still made him an obstacle.

"Haul us off later if you want," I said. "We won't resist. But you have to let us talk first. We know who killed the queen."

"So do we," said one of the guardians. "Now, the rest of you . . . back away before you're hurt. These are dangerous fugitives."

"They need to talk," said Abe. "They have evidence."

Again, he pushed forward with his case, acting confidently about things he had no clue about. He was staking it all on me. I was starting to like him. It was kind of unfortunate that our evidence wasn't as 100 percent solid as I'd hoped, but as I'd said earlier . . . technicalities.

"Let them talk."

It was a new voice, but a voice I knew by heart. Lissa pushed her way through two of the guardians. They held their tight position, the immediate concern being that we not escape. This allowed her to slip through—but only so one could grab her arm and stop her from reaching us.

"They've come this far. They were right about . . . Jill." Boy, that was *not* easy for her to say with a straight face, seeing as she hadn't entirely come to terms with the issue. My imminent death was probably the only thing distracting her from the earth shattering experience of learning she had a

potential sibling. She too was taking a lot on faith here, confident I was telling the truth. "You've got them. They can't go anywhere. Just let them talk. I've got evidence to support their case too."

"I'd hold off on sharing that, Liss," I said in a low voice. Lissa still believed Daniella was the killer and wasn't going to like hearing the truth. Lissa flashed me a confused look but didn't protest.

"Let's hear them," said one of the guardians—and not just any: Hans. "After an escape like they pulled, I'd really like to know what brought them back."

Hans was helping us?

"But," he continued, "I'm sure you two will understand we'll have to restrain you before you make your great reveal."

I looked at Dimitri who had already turned to me. We'd both known what we were getting ourselves into, and honestly, this was a better scenario than I'd envisioned.

"Okay," said Dimitri. He glanced at our noble protectors. "It's okay. Let them get through."

My mom and the others didn't move right away. "Do it," I said. "Don't end up as our cellmates."

I thought for sure those loveable fools wouldn't listen to me. But Mikhail backed off first, and then the others did too, practically in sync. In a flash, guardians seized them all, leading them away. Dimitri and I stayed put, and four guardians moved in, two for Dimitri and two for me. Adrian had retreated with the others, but Lissa still stood a few feet away from us, all her trust in me.

"Get on with it," said Hans. He gripped my right arm tightly.

I met Lissa's eyes, hating what I had to say. But, no. She wasn't the one I was worried about hurting the most. Looking out into the audience, I found Christian, who was understandably watching this drama with avid attention. I had to turn away and stare at the crowd as a whole, refusing to see individual faces. Just a blur.

"I didn't kill Tatiana Ivashkov," I said. Several people grumbled doubtfully. "I didn't like her. But I didn't kill her." I glanced at Hans. "You've questioned the janitor who testified about where I was during the murder, right? And he ID'd the man who attacked Lissa as the one who paid him off to lie about where I was?" I'd learned from Mikhail that Joe had eventually admitted to taking money from the mystery Moroi, once the guardians had cornered him with the picture.

Hans frowned, hesitated, and then nodded for me to continue.

"There's no record of his existence—at least not with the guardians. But the Alchemists know who he is. They saw him at one of their facilities—acting as someone's bodyguard." My eyes fell on Ethan Moore, who stood with the guardians near the door. "A bodyguard for someone who was let in to see Tatiana the night she died: Tasha Ozera."

There was no need for any uproar from the audience this time because Tasha more than made up for it on her own. She'd been sitting next to Christian and sprang up from her chair.

"What on earth are you saying, Rose?" she exclaimed. "Are you out of your mind?"

When I'd stood there defiantly, ready to face the crowd and demand justice, I'd been full of triumph and power. Now . . . now I was just sad as I stared at someone I'd always trusted, someone who was staring back at me with so much shock and hurt.

"I wish I was . . . but it's true. We both know it is. You killed Tatiana."

Tasha's disbelief grew, tinged now with a little anger, though she still seemed to be giving me the benefit of the doubt. "I never, *never* believed you killed her—and I've fought for you on that. Why are you doing this? Are you playing on the Strigoi taint in our family? I thought you were above that kind of prejudice."

I swallowed. I'd thought getting evidence would be the hard part. It was nothing compared to revealing it. "What I'm saying has nothing to do with Strigoi. I almost wish it did. You hated Tatiana for her age law and refusal to let Moroi fight." Another memory came to me, when Tasha had learned about the secret training sessions. Tasha had been aghast with what I now suspected might have been guilt at misjudging the queen.

The crowd was riveted and stunned, but one person came to life: an Ozera I didn't know but who apparently had family solidarity on his mind. He stood up, crossing his arms defiantly. "Half this Court hated Tatiana for that law. You among them."

"I didn't have my bodyguard bribe a witness or attack Lis—Princess Dragomir. And don't pretend you didn't know the guy," I warned her. "He was your bodyguard. You were seen together." Ian's description of her when she visited St. Louis had been perfectly clear: long black hair, pale blue eyes, and scarring on one side of her face.

"Rose, I can't even believe this is happening, but if James—that was his name—did whatever you're talking about, then he acted alone. He always had radical ideas. I knew that when I hired him as outside protection, but I never thought he was capable of murder." She glanced around, looking for someone in charge, and finally settled on the Council. "I've always believed Rose was innocent. If James is the one responsible for this, then I'm more than happy to tell you whatever I know to clear Rose's name."

So, so easy. The mystery Moroi—James—was almost everywhere Tasha had been. He'd also been spotted in suspicious situations where she hadn't been—like Joe's bribery and Lissa's attack. I could save Tasha and just blame it all on him. He was already dead. Tasha and I could stay friends. She'd acted on principle, right? What was wrong with that?

Christian stood up beside her, looking at me like I was a stranger. "Rose, how can you say any of this? You *know* her. You know she wouldn't do it. Stop making a scene and let us figure out how that James guy killed the queen."

So, so easy. Blame the dead man.

"James couldn't have staked Tatiana," I said. "He had an injured hand. It takes both hands for a Moroi to stake someone. I've seen it happen twice now. And I bet if you can get a straight answer out of Ethan Moore . . ." I glanced over at the guardian who had gone pale. He could probably jump into a fight and kill without hesitation. But this kind of scrutiny? And eventual interrogation by his peers? I didn't think he'd hold up. It was probably the reason Tasha had been able to manipulate him. "James wasn't there the night

Tatiana died, was he? And I don't think Daniella Ivashkov was either, despite what Princess Dragomir was told earlier. But Tasha was. She was in the queen's chambers—and you didn't report it."

Ethan looked like he wanted to bolt, but his odds of escape were about as good as mine and Dimitri's. He slowly shook his head. "Tasha wouldn't kill anyone." Not exactly the confirmation of her location I wanted—but close. The guardians would get more out of him later.

"Rose!" Christian was pissed off now. Seeing him look at me with such outrage hurt even more than Tasha's expression. "Stop it!"

Lissa took a few hesitant steps forward. I could feel in her mind that she didn't want to believe what I was saying either . . . yet she still trusted me. She thought of a controversial solution. "I know it's wrong . . . but if we used compulsion on the suspects . . ."

"Don't even suggest that!" exclaimed Tasha, turning her sharp eyes on Lissa. "Stay out of this. Your future's on the line here. A future that could make you great and achieve the things our people need."

"A future you could manipulate," I realized. "Lissa believes in a lot of the reforms you do . . . and you think you could convince her of ones she doesn't. Especially if she's with your nephew. That's why you've fought so hard to change the quorum law. You wanted her to be queen."

Christian started to step forward, but Tasha laid a restraining hand on his shoulder. It didn't stop him from speaking. "That's idiotic. If she wanted Lissa to be queen, why make that James guy attack her?"

That was a mystery for me too, one of the holes I hadn't quite figured out. But Dimitri had. Conscious of his two guards, he shifted closer to me.

"Because no one was supposed to die." Dimitri's low, resonant voice sounded wonderful with the room's acoustics. He needed no microphone as he directed his words to Tasha. "You didn't expect a guardian to be with her." He was right, I realized. Eddie had been drafted that night under weird circumstances and only barely made it back in time to see Ambrose with Lissa. "James was probably going to fake an attack and run . . . enough to generate sympathy and more support for Vasilisa. Which it certainly did—just a little more severely."

The outrage on Tasha's face transformed to something I couldn't entirely gauge right away. She'd seemed offended at my accusations, but from Dimitri—it was more. She looked legitimately hurt. Crushed. I knew that look. I'd seen it on Adrian's face a couple hours ago.

"Dimka, not you too," she said.

Through Lissa's eyes, I watched the colors of Tasha's aura shift, burn a little brighter as she gazed at Dimitri. I could see exactly what Sonya had explained to me, how the aura showed affection.

"And that's why I took the fall," I murmured softly. No one but Dimitri and our guardians heard me.

"Hmm?" Dimitri asked.

I just shook my head. All this time, Tasha had still loved Dimitri. I knew she had last year, when she'd made him an offer to hook up and have kids—not something a lot of dhampir men had the chance to get. He'd refused, and I thought she had accepted simply being friends with him. She hadn't. She'd still

loved him. When Lissa had revealed my relationship with Dimitri to Hans, Tasha had already known. But for how long? I wasn't sure. She'd obviously known about the relationship before killing Tatiana, and putting the murder on me left Tasha free and clear *and* opened back up her chances with Dimitri.

There was no point in bringing up her personal motives for blaming me. Tatiana's murder was the real issue at stake. I just looked at Hans. "You can take me into custody, I meant it. But don't you think you've got enough to take her—and Ethan—in too?"

Hans's face was unreadable. His feelings toward me had always gone back and forth, since the day we met. Sometimes I was a troublemaker without a future. Other times I had the potential to be a leader. He'd believed I was a murderer, yet he'd still allowed me to address the crowd. He didn't really like my friends either. What would he do now?

He lifted his eyes from my face and looked to where several guardians were stationed in the audience, ready for any action. He gave a curt nod. "Take Lady Ozera. And Moore. We'll question them."

Seeing as Tasha was seated amidst other people, there was a bit of fear and panic when four guardians moved toward her. They avoided injuring other audience members as much as possible, but there was still plenty of pushing and shoving. What came as a total surprise was how fiercely Tasha fought back. She was trained, I remembered. Not in the same way guardians were, but enough to make it hard to get a hold of her. She could kick and punch—and stake queens—and even managed to knock one guardian down.

She might actually try to fight her way out of here, I realized—though I didn't believe for an instant she could. It was too crowded and chaotic. Guardians were heading toward the fray. Terrified Moroi were trying to get *away* from the fight. Everybody seemed to be getting in everyone else's way. Suddenly, a loud *crack* echoed through the room. A gunshot. Most of the Moroi dropped to the floor, though guardians kept coming. Holding a handgun she must have seized from the guardian she'd knocked over, Tasha grabbed the first Moroi she could with her free hand. So help me, it was Mia Rinaldi. She'd been sitting near Christian. I didn't think Tasha even noticed her hostage choice.

"Don't move!" Tasha yelled at the encroaching guardians. The gun was at Mia's head, and I felt my heart stop. How had things escalated to this point? I'd never foreseen this. My task was supposed to be neat and tidy. Reveal Tasha. Put her away. Done.

The guardians froze, less because of her command and more because they were sizing up how to deal with the total threat. Meanwhile, Tasha began to slowly—very slowly—make her way toward the exit, dragging Mia along. Her progress was slow and unwieldy, thanks to all the chairs and people in the way. The delay gave the guardians time to solve this ugly dilemma. *They come first.* Mia's life—a Moroi life—was on the line. The guardians didn't want Mia killed, but a gun-toting warrior Moroi also couldn't be allowed to go free.

The thing was, Tasha wasn't the only warrior Moroi in the room. She had probably picked the worst hostage possible, and I could tell by the glint in Mia's eyes that she was not going to go quietly. Lissa realized this too. One or both of them were going to get killed, and Lissa couldn't let that happen. If she

could get Tasha to look at her, she could compel her into submission.

No, no, no, I thought. I didn't need another friend involved.

Both Lissa and I saw Mia tensing to break her way out of Tasha's hold. Lissa realized she had to act now. I could feel it through the bond. I could feel her thoughts, the decision, even the way her body's muscles and nerves moved forward to get Tasha's attention. I felt it all so clearly, as if we shared the same body. I knew where Lissa would move before she even did.

"Tasha, please don't—"

Lissa sprang forward, her plaintive cry interrupted as Mia kicked back at Tasha and broke away, slipping down out of the gun's reach. Tasha, startled on two fronts, still had her gun pointed out. With Mia out of her grasp and everything happening so fast, Tasha frantically fired off a couple shots at the first threat moving toward her—which wasn't the rapidly approaching guardians. It was a slim figure in white who had shouted at Tasha.

Or, well, it would have been. Like I said, I'd known exactly where Lissa would step and what she would do. And in those precious seconds before she acted, I broke out of my captors' hold and threw myself before Lissa. Someone leapt after me, but they were too late. That was when Tasha's gun had gone off. I felt a biting and burning in my chest, and then there was nothing but pain—a pain so complete and so intense it was almost beyond comprehension.

I felt myself falling, felt Lissa catching me and yelling something—maybe to me, maybe to someone else. There was so much commotion in the room that I didn't know what had happened with Tasha. There was just me and the pain that my mind was trying to block out. The world seemed to grow quieter and quieter. I saw Lissa looking down on me, shouting something I couldn't hear. She was beautiful. Brilliant. Crowned in light . . . but there was darkness closing in around her. And in that darkness, I saw the faces . . . the ghosts and spirits that always followed me. Thicker they grew, closing in. Beckoning.

A gun. I had been brought down by a gun. It was practically comical. *Cheaters*, I thought. I'd spent my life focusing on hand-to-hand combat, learning to dodge fangs and powerful hands that could snap my neck. A gun? It was so . . . well, easy. Should I be insulted? I didn't know. Did it matter? I didn't know that either. All I knew in that moment was that I was going to die, regardless.

My vision was growing dimmer, the blackness and ghosts closing in, and I swore, it was like I could hear Robert whispering in my ear: *The world of the dead won't give you up a second time.*

Just before the light completely vanished, I saw Dimitri's face join Lissa's. I wanted to smile. I decided then that if the two people I loved most were safe, I could leave this world. The dead could finally have me. And I'd fulfilled my purpose, right? To protect? I'd done it. I'd saved Lissa, just like I'd sworn I'd always do. I was dying in battle. No appointment books for me.

Lissa's face shone with tears, and I hoped that mine conveyed how much I loved her. With the last spark of life I had left, I tried to speak, tried to let Dimitri know I loved him too and that he had to protect her now. I don't think he understood, but the words of the guardian mantra were my last conscious thought.

They come first.

THIRTY-FOUR

I DIDN'T WAKE UP IN the world of the dead.

I didn't even wake up in a hospital or some other type of medical center—which, believe me, I'd done plenty of times. No, I woke up in luxury, in a huge bedroom with gilded furniture. Heaven? Probably not with my behaviors. My canopied bed had a red-and-gold velvet comforter, thick enough to be a mattress itself. Candles flickered on a small table against the far wall and filled the room with the scent of jasmine. I had no clue where I was or how I'd gotten here, but as my last memories of pain and darkness played out in my mind, I decided the fact that I was actually breathing was good enough.

"Sleeping Beauty awakens."

That voice . . . that wonderful, honey-like voice with its soft accent. It enveloped me, and with it came the impossible truth and its full impact: I was alive. I was alive. And Dimitri was here.

I couldn't see him but felt a smile come to my lips. "Are you my nurse?"

I heard him get up from a chair and walk over. Seeing him stand over me like that reminded me of just how tall he truly was. He looked down at me with a smile of his own—one of those full and rare smiles. He had cleaned up since last I'd seen him, his brown hair tied neatly back behind his neck, though he hadn't shaved for a couple days. I tried to sit up, but he tsked me back.

"No, no, you need to lie down." Soreness in my chest told me he was right. My mind might be awake, but the rest of me was exhausted. I had no idea how much time had passed, but something told me my body had been fighting a battle—not with a Strigoi or anything like one, but with itself. A battle to stay alive.

"Then come closer," I told him. "I want to see you."

He considered this a moment and then kicked off his shoes. Turning on my side—which made me wince—I managed to wiggle over a little to make room near the bed's edge. He curled up beside me. Our faces rested on the same pillow, only a couple of inches apart as we gazed at each other.

"Is this better?" he asked.

"Much."

With his long, graceful fingers, he reached out and brushed hair from my face before tracing the edge of my cheekbone. "How are you?"

"Hungry."

He laughed softly and cautiously slid his hand down to rest on my lower

back, in a sort of half-embrace. "Of course you are. I think they've only managed to get broth into you so far. Well, that and IV fluids early on. You're probably in sugar withdrawal."

I cringed. I didn't like needles or tubes and was glad I hadn't been awake to see them. (Tattoo needles were a different matter.) "How long have I been out?"

"A few days."

"A few days . . ." I shivered, and he tugged the covers higher on me, thinking I was cold. "I shouldn't be alive," I whispered. Gunshots like that . . . they were too fast, too close to my heart. Or in my heart? I put my hand to my chest. I didn't know precisely where I'd been hit. It all ached. "Oh Lord. Lissa healed me, didn't she?" It would have taken so much spirit. She shouldn't have done that. She couldn't afford to. Except . . . why would I still feel pain? If she'd healed me, she would have gone all the way.

"No, she didn't heal you."

"No?" I frowned, unable to process that. How else would I have survived? A surprising answer came to mind. "Then . . . Adrian? He'd never . . . after how I treated him . . . no. He couldn't have . . ."

"What, you think he'd let you die?"

I didn't answer. The bullets might be long gone, but thinking of Adrian still made my heart—figuratively—ache.

"No matter how he feels . . ." Dimitri hesitated. This was a delicate topic, after all. "Well, he wouldn't have let you die. He wanted to heal you. But he didn't either."

I felt bad for thinking so little of Adrian. Dimitri was right. Adrian never would have abandoned me out of spite, but I was rapidly running out of options here. "Then who? Sonya?"

"No one," he said simply. "Well, you, I suppose."

"I . . . what?"

"People can heal without magic now and then, Rose." There was amusement in his voice, though his face stayed sober. "And your wounds . . . they were bad. No one thought you'd survive. You went into surgery, and then we all just waited."

"But why . . ." I felt very arrogant, asking the next question. "Why *didn't* Adrian or Lissa heal me?"

"Oh, they wanted to, believe me. But in the aftermath, in the chaos . . . the Court went under lockdown. They were both taken away and put under heavy protection before they could act. No one would let them near you, not when they still thought you might be a murderer. They had to be certain about Tasha first, even though her own actions were pretty damning."

It took me a moment to get past the idea that modern medicine and my body's own stamina had healed me. I'd grown too used to spirit. This didn't seem possible. As I tried to wrap my mind around the concept, the rest of Dimitri's meaning hit me. "Is Tasha . . . still alive?"

His face fell even more. "Yes. They caught her right after she shot you—before anyone else got hurt. She's detained, and more evidence has been coming in."

"Calling her out was one of the hardest things I've ever done," I said.

"Fighting Strigoi was easier than that."

"I know. It was hard for me to see, hard for me to believe." There was a far-off look in his eyes, reminding me that Dimitri had known her longer than he'd known me. "But she made her choices, and all the charges against you have been dropped. You're a free woman now. More than that. A hero. Abe's bragging that it's all his doing."

That brought my smile back. "Of course he is. I'll probably get a bill from him soon." I felt dizzy with both joy and astonishment. *A free woman.* I'd been burdened with accusations and a death sentence for what felt like years, and now . . . now it had all disappeared.

Dimitri laughed, and I wanted to stay like this forever, just the two of us, sweet and unguarded. Well—maybe not exactly this. I could've done without the pain and thick bandages I felt on my chest. He and I had had so few times alone, moments when we could really relax and openly acknowledge being in love. Things had only begun to mend between us at the end there . . . and it had almost been too late. It might still be.

"So what now?" I asked.

"I'm not sure." He rested his cheek against my forehead. "I'm just so glad . . . so glad you're alive. I've been so close to losing you so many times. When I saw you on the floor, and there was so much commotion and confusion . . . I felt so helpless. I realized you were right. We waste our lives with guilt and self-loathing. When you looked at me there at the end . . . I saw it. You did love me."

"You doubted?" I meant the words jokingly, but they came out sounding offended. Maybe I was, a little. I'd told him I loved him plenty of times.

"No. I mean, I knew then that you didn't just love me. I realized you really had forgiven me."

"There was nothing to forgive, not really." I'd told him that before too.

"I've always believed there was." He pulled back and looked at me again. "And that's what was holding me back. No matter what you said, I just couldn't believe it . . . couldn't believe you would forgive all the things I did to you in Siberia and after Lissa healed me. I thought you were deluding yourself."

"Well. It wouldn't be the first time I've done that. But no, this time I wasn't."

"I know, and with that revelation . . . in that split second that I knew you forgave me and that I really had your love, I was finally able to forgive myself too. All those burdens, those ties to the past . . . they went away. It was like . . ."

"Being free? Flying?"

"Yes. Except . . . it came too late. This sounds crazy, but while I was looking down at you, having all these thoughts coming together in my head, it was like . . . like I could see death's hand reaching for you. And there was nothing I could do. I was powerless. I couldn't help."

"You did," I told him. "The last things I saw before blacking out were you and Lissa." Well, besides the skeletal faces, but mentioning that would have killed this romantic moment. "I don't know how I survived getting shot, how I beat the odds . . . but I'm pretty sure your love—both of you—gave me the strength to fight through. I had to get back to you guys. God only knows what

trouble you'd get into without me."

Dimitri had no words for that and answered instead by bringing his mouth to mine. We kissed, lightly at first, and the sweetness of the moment overpowered any pain I felt. The intensity had just barely picked up when he pulled away.

"Hey, what gives?" I asked.

"You're still recovering," he chastised. "You might think you're back to normal, but you aren't."

"This *is* normal for me. And you know, I thought with all this freedom and self-discovery and expression of our love stuff that we could finally stop with the whole Zen master wisdom and practical advice crap."

This got me an outright grin. "Roza, that's not going to happen. Take it or leave it."

I pressed a kiss to his lips. "If it means getting you, I'll take it." I wanted to kiss him again and prove who really did have greater self-control, but that damned thing called reality set in. "Dimitri . . . for real, what happens to us?"

"Life," he said easily. "It goes on. We go on. We're guardians. We protect and maybe change our world."

"No pressure," I remarked. "But what's the ‘we' and ‘guardians' part? I was pretty sure we were out of that career path."

"Mmm." He cupped my face, and I thought he might try another kiss. I hoped he would. "Along with our pardons, we received our guardian status again."

"Even you? They believe you're not a Strigoi?" I exclaimed.

He nodded.

"Huh. Even if I got my name cleared, my ideal future was that we'd get filing jobs near each other."

Dimitri moved closer to me, his eyes sparkling with a secret. "It gets better: you're Lissa's guardian."

"What?" I almost pulled away. "That's impossible. They'd never . . ."

"They did. She'll have others, so they probably figured it was okay to let you hang around if someone else could keep you in line," he teased.

"You're not . . ." A lump formed in my stomach, a reminder of a problem that had plagued us so long ago. "You're not one of her guardians too, are you?" It had constantly been a concern, that conflict of interest. I wanted him near me. Always. But how could we watch Lissa and put her safety first if we were worried about each other? The past was returning to torment us.

"No, I have a different assignment."

"Oh." For some reason, that made me a little sad too, even though I knew it was the smarter choice.

"I'm Christian's guardian."

This time I did sit up, doctor's orders or no. Stitches tugged in my chest, but I ignored the sharp discomfort. "But that's . . . that's practically the same thing!"

Dimitri sat up too and seemed to be enjoying my shock, which was really kind of cruel, seeing as I'd almost died and everything. "A little. But they won't be together every moment, especially with her going to Lehigh. He's not going . . . but they'll keep coming back to each other. And when they do, so will we.

It's a good mix. Besides . . ." He grew serious again. "I think you've proved to everyone that you're willing to put her life first."

I shook my head. "Yeah, but no one was shooting at you. Only her." I said it lightly, but it did make me wonder: what would I do if they were both in trouble? *Trust him*, a voice in my head said. *Trust him to take care of himself. He'll do the same for you*. I eyed Dimitri, recalling a shadow in my periphery back in the ballroom. "You followed when I jumped in front of Lissa, didn't you? Who were you going for? Me or her?"

He studied me for several long seconds. He could have lied. He could have given the easy answer by saying he'd intended to push both of us out of the way—if that was even possible, which I didn't recall. But Dimitri didn't lie. "I don't know, Roza. I don't know."

I sighed. "This isn't going to be easy."

"It never is," he said, pulling me into his arms. I leaned against his chest and closed my eyes. No, it wouldn't be easy, but it would be worth it. As long as we were together, it would be worth it.

We sat like that for a long time, until a discrete knock at the half-open door broke us apart. Lissa stood in the doorway.

"Sorry," she said, her face shining with joy when she saw me. "Should have put a sock on the door. Didn't realize things were getting hot and heavy."

"No avoiding it," I said lightly, clasping Dimitri's hand. "Things are always hot with him around."

Dimitri looked scandalized. He'd never held back when we were in bed together, but his private nature wouldn't let him even hint about such matters to others. It was mean, but I laughed and kissed his cheek.

"Oh, this is going to be fun," I said. "Now that everything's out in the open."

"Yeah," he said. "I got a pretty 'fun' look from your father the other day." He gave Lissa a quick, knowing glance and then stood up. Leaning down, he kissed the top of my head. "I should go and let you two talk."

"Will you be back?" I asked as he moved to the door.

He paused and smiled at me, and those dark eyes answered my questions and so much more. "Of course."

Lissa took his spot, sitting on the bed's edge. She hugged me gingerly, no doubt worried about my injuries. She then scolded me for sitting up, but I didn't care. Happiness surged through me. I was so glad she was okay, so relieved, and—

And I had no idea how she felt.

The bond was gone. And not like during the jail escape, when she'd put the wall up. There was simply nothing there between us. I was with myself, completely and utterly alone, just as I had been years ago. My eyes widened, and she laughed.

"I wondered when you'd notice," she said.

"How . . . how is this possible?" I was frozen and numb. The bond. The bond was *gone*. I felt like my arm had been amputated. "And how do you know?"

She frowned. "Part of it's instinct . . . but Adrian saw it. That our auras aren't connected anymore."

"But how? How could that happen?" I sounded crazy and desperate. The bond couldn't be gone. It couldn't.

"I'm not entirely sure," she admitted, her frown deepening. "I talked about it a lot with Sonya and, uh, Adrian. We think when I brought you back the first time, it was spirit alone that held you back from the land of the dead and that kept you tied to me. This time . . . you nearly died again. Or maybe you did for a moment. Only, you and your body fought your way back. It was *you* who got out, with no help from spirit. And once that happened . . ." She shrugged. "Like I said, we're only guessing. But Sonya thinks once your own strength broke you away, you didn't need any help being pulled back from death. You did it on your own. And when you freed yourself of spirit, you freed yourself from me. You didn't need a bond to keep you with the living."

It was crazy. Impossible. "But if . . . if you're saying I escaped the land of the dead, I'm not, like, immortal or anything, am I?"

Lissa laughed again. "No, we're certain of that. Sonya explained it, saying anything alive can die, and as long as you've got an aura, you're alive. Strigoi are immortal but not alive, so they don't have auras and—"

The world spun. "I'll take your word for it. I think maybe I do need to lie down."

"That's probably a good idea."

I gently eased myself onto my back. Desperately needing distraction from what I'd just learned—because it was still too surreal, still impossible to process—I eyed my surroundings. The lush room was bigger than I'd previously realized. It kept going and going, branching into other rooms. It was a suite. Maybe an apartment. I could just make out a living room with leather furniture and a flat screen TV. "Where are we?"

"In palace housing," she replied.

"*Palace* housing? How'd we end up here?"

"How do you think?" she asked dryly.

"I . . ." I couldn't work my mouth for a moment. I needed no bond to realize what had happened. Another impossibility had occurred while I'd been out of it. "Crap. They had the election, didn't they? They elected you queen, once Jill was there to stand in for your family."

She shook her head and almost laughed. "My reaction was a little stronger than ‘crap,' Rose. Do you have any idea what you've done?"

She looked anxious, stressed, and totally overwhelmed. I wanted to be serious and comforting for her sake . . . but I could feel a goofy grin spreading over my face. She groaned.

"You're happy."

"Liss, you were meant for this! You're better than any of the other candidates."

"Rose!" she cried. "Running for queen was supposed to be a diversion. I'm only *eighteen*."

"So was Alexandra."

Lissa shook her head in exasperation. "I'm so sick of hearing about her! She lived centuries ago, you know. I think people died when they were thirty back then. So she was practically middle-aged."

I caught hold of her hand. "You're going to be great. It doesn't matter how old you are. And it's not like you have to call meetings and analyze law books all on your own, you know. I mean, *I'm* sure not going to do any of that, but

there are other smart people. Ariana Szelsky didn't make the last test, but you know she'll help if you ask her to. She's still on the Council, and there are others you can rely on. We just have to find them. I believe in you."

Lissa sighed and looked down, her hair hanging forward in a curtain. "I know. And part of me is excited, like this will restore my family's honor. I think that's what's saved me from a total breakdown. I didn't want to be queen, but if I have to . . . then I'm going to do it right. I feel like . . . like I have the world at my fingertips, like I can do so much good. But I'm so afraid of messing up too." She looked up sharply. "And I'm not giving up on the rest of my life either. I guess I'm going to be the first queen in college."

"Cool," I said. "You can IM with the Council from campus. Maybe you can command people to do your homework."

She apparently didn't think the joke was as funny as I did. "Going back to my *family*. Rose . . . how long did you know about Jill?"

Damn. I'd known this part of the conversation would eventually be coming. I averted my eyes. "Not really that long. We didn't want to stress you until we knew it was real," I added hastily.

"I can't believe . . ." She shook her head. "I just can't believe it."

I had to go on her tone, not the bond. It was so strange, like losing one of my key senses. Sight. Hearing. "Are you upset?"

"Of course I am! How can you be surprised?"

"I figured you'd be happy . . ."

"Happy to find out my dad cheated on my mom? Happy to have a sister I hardly know? I've tried to talk to her, but . . ." Lissa sighed again. "It's so weird. Almost weirder than suddenly being queen. I don't know what to do. I don't know what to think of my father. And I sure as hell don't know what to do with her."

"Love them both," I said softly. "They're your family. Jill's great, you know. Get to know her. Be excited."

"I don't know if I can. I think you're more of a sister to me than she'll ever be." Lissa stared off at nothing. "And of all people . . . I was convinced for so long that there was something going on between her and Christian."

"Well, out of all the worries in your world, that's one you can let go because it's not true." But within her comment was something dark and sad. "How *is* Christian?"

She turned back to me, her eyes full of pain. "He's having a hard time. I am too. He visits her. Tasha. He hates what she did, but . . . well, she's still his family. It hurts him, but he tries to hide it. You know how he is."

"Yeah." Christian had spent a good portion of his life masking dark feelings with snark and sarcasm. He was a pro at fooling others about how he truly felt.

"I know he'll be better in time . . . I just hope I can be there for him enough. So much is happening. College, being queen . . . and always, always, there's spirit there, pressing down on me. Smothering me."

Alarm shot through me. And panic. Panic over something far worse than not knowing what Lissa was feeling or where she was. Spirit. I was afraid of spirit —and the fact that I couldn't fight it for her. "The darkness . . . I can't absorb it anymore. What will we do?"

A twisted smile crossed her lips. "You mean, what will *I* do. It's my problem now, Rose. Like it always should have been."

"But, no . . . you can't. St. Vladimir—"

"Isn't me. And you can protect me from some things but not all."

I shook my head. "No, no. I can't let you face spirit alone."

"I'm not exactly alone. I talked to Sonya. She's really good at healing charms and thinks there's a way to keep myself in balance."

"Oksana said the same thing," I recalled, feeling hardly reassured.

"And . . . there's always the antidepressants. I don't like them, but I'm queen now. I have responsibilities. I'll do what I have to. A queen gives up everything, right?"

"I guess." I couldn't help feeling frightened. Useless. "I'm just so worried about you, and I don't know how to help you anymore."

"I told you: you don't have to. I'll protect my mind. Your job's to protect my body, right? And Dimitri will be around too. It'll all be okay."

The conversation with Dimitri came back to me. *Who were you going for? Me or her?*

I gave her the best smile I could. "Yeah. It'll all be okay."

Her hand squeezed mine. "I'm so glad you're back, Rose. You'll always be part of me, no matter what. And honestly . . . I'm kind of glad you can't see my sex life anymore."

"That makes two of us." I laughed. No bond. No magical attachment. It was going to be so strange, but really . . . did I need it? In real life, people formed bonds of another nature. Bonds of love and loyalty. We would get through this. "I'll always be there for you, you know. Anything you need."

"I know," she said. "And actually . . . I need you for something now . . ."

"Name it," I said.

She did.

THIRTY-FIVE

I WISHED LISSA HAD needed me to go take out an army of Strigoi. I would have felt more comfortable with that than what she needed to do now: meet with Jill to discuss the coronation. Lissa wanted me there for support, as a kind of go-between. I wasn't able to walk that well yet, so we waited another day. Lissa seemed glad for the delay.

Jill was waiting for us in a small room I'd never expected to see again: the parlor where Tatiana had berated me for moving in on Adrian. It had been a pretty bizarre experience at the time, seeing as Adrian and I hadn't actually been involved back then. Now, after everything that had occurred between him and me, it just felt . . . strange. Confusing. I still didn't know what had happened to him since Tasha's arrest.

Walking in there, I also felt terribly . . . alone. No, not alone. Uninformed. Vulnerable. Jill sat in a chair, her hands folded in her lap. She stared straight ahead with an unreadable face. Beside me, Lissa's own features were equally blank. She felt . . . well, that was the thing. I didn't know. *I didn't know*. I mean, I could tell she was uncomfortable, but there were no thoughts in my head to tip me off. I had no specifics. Again, I reminded myself that the rest of the world worked like this. You functioned alone. You did your best to manage strange situations without the magical insight of another person. I'd never realized how much I'd taken the thoughts of even just one other person for granted.

The one thing I felt sure of was that both Lissa and Jill were freaked out by each other—but not by me. That was why I was here.

"Hey, Jill," I said, smiling. "How are you?"

She snapped out of whatever thoughts had been occupying her and jumped up from the chair. I thought that was strange, but then it made sense. Lissa. You rose when a queen entered the room.

"It's okay," said Lissa, stumbling over her words a little. "Sit." She took a seat opposite Jill. It was the biggest chair in the room—the one Tatiana had always sat in.

Jill hesitated a moment, then shifted her gaze back to me. I must have provided some encouragement because she returned to her chair. I sat in one beside Lissa, wincing as a small pain tightened in my chest. Worry for me momentarily distracted Jill from Lissa.

"How are you feeling? Are you okay? Should you even be out of bed?" The cute, rambling nature. I was glad to see it again.

"Fine," I lied. "Good as new."

"I was worried. When I saw what happened . . . I mean, there was so much blood and so much craziness and no one knew if you'd pull through . . ." Jill frowned. "I don't know. It was all so scary. I'm so glad you're okay."

I kept smiling, hoping to reassure her. Silence fell then. The room grew tense. In political situations, Lissa was the expert, always able to smooth everything over with the right words. I was the one who spoke up in uncomfortable scenarios, saying the things that shocked others. The things no one wanted to hear. This situation seemed like one that required her diplomacy, but I knew it was on me to take charge.

"Jill," I said, "we wanted to know if you'd be willing to, well, take part in the coronation ceremony."

Jill's eyes flicked briefly to Lissa—still stone-faced—and then back to me. "What does ‘take part' mean, exactly? What would I have to do?"

"Nothing hard," I assured her. "It's just some formalities that are usually done by family members. Ceremonial stuff. Like you did with the vote." I hadn't witnessed that, but Jill had apparently only had to stand by Lissa's side to show family strength. Such a small thing for a law to hinge on. "Mostly, it's about being on display and putting on a good face."

"Well," mused Jill, "I've been doing that for most of this week."

"I've been doing it for most of my life," said Lissa.

Jill looked startled. Again, I felt at a loss without the bond. Lissa's tone hadn't made her meaning clear. Was it a challenge to Jill—that the girl hadn't faced nearly what Lissa had? Or was it supposed to be sympathy for Jill's lack of experience?

"You'll . . . you'll get used to it," I said. "Over time."

Jill shook her head, a small and bitter smile on her face. "I don't know about that."

I didn't either. I wasn't sure how one handled the kind of situation she'd been dropped into. My mind rapidly ran through a list of more meaningless, kind things I could say, but Lissa finally took over.

"I know how weird this is," she said. She determinedly met Jill's green eyes —the only feature the sisters shared, I decided. Jill had the makings of a future Emily. Lissa carried a mix of her parents' traits. "This is weird for me too. I don't know what to do."

"What do you want?" asked Jill quietly.

I heard the real question. Jill wanted to know if Lissa wanted *her*. Lissa had been devastated by the death of her brother . . . but a surprise illegitimate sibling was no substitute for Andre. I tried to imagine what it would be like to be in either girl's place. I tried and failed.

"I don't know," admitted Lissa. "I don't know what I want."

Jill nodded, dropping her gaze, but not before I caught sight of the emotion playing across her face. Disappointment—yet, Lissa's answer hadn't entirely been unexpected.

Jill asked the next best thing. "Do you want . . . do you *want* me to be in the ceremonies?"

The question hung in the air. It was a good one. It was the reason we'd come here, but did Lissa actually want this? Studying her, I still wasn't sure. I

didn't know if she was just following protocol, trying to get Jill to play a role expected among royalty. In this case, there was no law that said Jill had to do anything. She simply had to exist.

"Yes," said Lissa at last. I heard the truth in her words, and something inside of me lightened. Lissa didn't just want Jill for the sake of image. A part of Lissa wanted Jill in her life—but managing that would be difficult. Still, it was a start, and Jill seemed to recognize that.

"Okay," she said. "Just tell me what I need to do." It occurred to me that Jill's youth and nervousness were deceptive. There were sparks of bravery and boldness within her, sparks that I felt certain would grow. She really was a Dragomir.

Lissa looked relieved, but I think it was because she'd made a tiny step of progress with her sister. It had nothing to do with the coronation. "Someone else will explain it all. I'm not really sure what you do, to be honest. But Rose is right. It won't be hard."

Jill simply nodded.

"Thank you," said Lissa. She stood up, and both Jill and I rose with her. "I . . . I really appreciate it."

That awkwardness returned as the three of us stood there. It would have been a good moment for the sisters to hug, but even though both seemed pleased at their progress, neither was ready for that. When Lissa looked at Jill, she still saw her father with another woman. When Jill looked at Lissa, she saw her life completely turned upside down—a life once shy and private now out there for the world to gawk at. I couldn't change her fate, but hugging I could do. Heedless of my stitches, I put my arms around the young girl.

"Thanks," I said, echoing Lissa. "This'll all be okay. You'll see."

Jill nodded yet again, and with no more to discuss, Lissa and I moved toward the door. Jill's voice brought us to a halt.

"Hey . . . what happens after the coronation? To me? To us?"

I glanced at Lissa. Another good question. Lissa turned toward Jill but still wasn't making direct eye contact. "We'll . . . we'll get to know each other. Things'll get better."

The smile that appeared on Jill's face was genuine—small, but genuine. "Okay," she said. There was hope in that smile too. Hope and relief. "I'd like that."

As for me, I had to hide a frown. I apparently could function without the bond because I could tell, with absolute confidence, that Lissa wasn't exactly giving the whole truth. What wasn't she telling Jill? Lissa *did* want things to be better, I was certain, even if she wasn't sure how. But there was something . . . something small that Lissa wasn't revealing to either of us, something that made me think Lissa didn't actually believe things would improve.

Out of nowhere, a strange echo from Victor Dashkov rang through my mind about Jill. *If she has any sense, Vasilisa will send her away*.

I didn't know why I remembered that, but it sent a chill through me. The sisters were both mustering smiles, and I hastily did as well, not wanting either to know my concerns. Lissa and I left after that, heading back toward my room. My little outing had been more tiring than I expected, and as much as I hated to admit it, I couldn't wait to lie down again.

When we reached my room, I still hadn't decided if I should ask Lissa about Jill or wait to get Dimitri's opinion. The decision was taken from me when we found an unexpected visitor waiting: Adrian.

He sat on my bed, head tipped back as though he was completely consumed by studying the ceiling. I knew better. He'd known the instant we approached —or at least when Lissa approached.

We stopped in the doorway, and he finally turned toward us. He looked like he hadn't slept in a while. Dark shadows hung under his eyes, and his cute face was hardened with lines of fatigue. Whether it was mental or physical fatigue, I couldn't say. Nonetheless, his lazy smile was the same as ever.

"Your majesty," he said grandly.

"Stop," scoffed Lissa. "You should know better."

"I've never known better," he countered. "*You* should know that."

I saw Lissa start to smile; then she glanced at me and grew serious, realizing this was hardly let's-have-fun-with-Adrian time.

"Well," she said uneasily, not looking very queenly at all. "I've got some things to do." She was going to bolt, I realized. I'd gone with her for her family chat, but she was going to abandon me now. Just as well, though. This conversation with Adrian had been inevitable, and I'd brought it on myself. I had to finish this on my own, just as I'd told Dimitri.

"I'm sure you do," I said. Her face turned hesitant, as though she was suddenly reconsidering. She felt guilty. She was worried about me and wanted to stand by me. I lightly touched her arm. "It's okay, Liss. I'll be okay. Go."

She squeezed my hand in return, her eyes wishing me good luck. She told Adrian goodbye and left, closing the door behind her.

It was just him and me now.

He stayed on my bed, watching me carefully. He still wore the smile he'd given Lissa, like this was no big deal. I knew otherwise and made no attempts to hide my feelings. Standing still made me tired, so I sat down in a nearby chair, nervously wondering what to say.

"Adrian—"

"Let's start with this, little dhampir," he said cordially. "Was it going on before you left Court?"

It took me a moment to follow that abrupt Adrian conversation format. He was asking if Dimitri and I had gotten back together before my arrest. I shook my head slowly.

"No. I was with you. Just you." True, I'd been a mess of emotions, but my intentions had been firm.

"Well. That's something," he said. Some of his pleasantness was starting to slip. I smelled it then, ever so faintly: alcohol and smoke. "Better some rekindling of sparks in the heat of battle or quest or whatever than you cheating right in front of me."

I shook my head more urgently now. "No, I swear. I didn't—nothing happened then . . . not until—" I hesitated on how to phrase my next words.

"Later?" he guessed. "Which makes it okay?

"No! Of course not. I . . ."

Damn it. I'd screwed up. Just because I hadn't cheated on Adrian at Court didn't mean that I *hadn't* cheated on him later. You could phrase it however

you wanted, but let's face it: sleeping with another guy in a hotel room was pretty much cheating if you had a boyfriend. It didn't matter if that guy was the love of your life or not.

"I'm sorry," I said. It was the simplest and most appropriate thing I could say. "I'm sorry. What I did was wrong. I didn't mean for it to happen. I thought . . . I really thought he and I were done. I was with you. I wanted to be with you. And then, I realized that—"

"No, no—stop." Adrian held up a hand, his voice tight now as his cool façade continued to crumble. "I really do *not* want to hear about the great revelation you had about how you guys were always meant to be together or whatever it was."

I stayed silent because, well, that kind of had been my revelation.

Adrian ran a hand through his hair. "Really, it's my fault. It was there. A hundred times there. How often did I see it? I knew. It kept happening. Over and over, you'd say you were through with him . . . and over and over, I'd believe it . . . no matter what my eyes showed me. No matter what my heart told me. My. Fault."

It was that slightly unhinged rambling—not that nervous kind of Jill's, but the unstable kind that worried me about how close he was getting to the edge of insanity. An edge I might very well be pushing him toward. I wanted to go over to him but had the sense to stay seated.

"Adrian, I—"

"I loved you!" he yelled. He jumped up out of his chair so quickly I never saw it coming. "I loved you, and you destroyed me. You took my heart and ripped it up. You might as well have staked me!" The change in his features also caught me by surprise. His voice filled the room. So much grief, so much anger. So unlike the usual Adrian. He strode toward me, hand clasped over his chest. "I. Loved. You. And you used me the whole time."

"No, no. It's not true." I wasn't afraid of Adrian, but in the face of that emotion, I found myself cringing. "I wasn't using you. I loved you. I still do, but—"

He looked disgusted. "Rose, come *on*."

"I mean it! I do love you." Now I stood up, pain or no, trying to look him in the eye. "I always will, but we're not . . . I don't think we work as a couple."

"That's a bullshit breakup line, and you know it."

He was kind of right, but I thought back to moments with Dimitri . . . how well we worked in sync, how he always seemed to get exactly what I felt. I meant what I'd said: I did love Adrian. He was wonderful, in spite of all his flaws. Because, really, who didn't have flaws? He and I had fun together. There was affection, but we weren't matched in the way Dimitri and I were.

"I'm not . . . I'm not the one for you," I said weakly.

"Because you're with another guy?"

"No, Adrian. Because . . . I don't. I don't know. I don't . . ." I was fumbling, badly. I didn't know how to explain what I felt, how you could care about someone and love hanging out with them—but still not work as a couple. "I don't balance you like you need."

"What the hell does that mean?" he exclaimed.

My heart ached for him, and I was so sorry for what I'd done . . . but this

was the truth of it all. "The fact that you have to ask says it all. When you find that person . . . you'll know." I didn't add that with his history, he'd probably have a number of false starts before finding that person. "And I know this sounds like another bullshit breakup line, but I really would like to be your friend."

He stared at me for several heavy seconds and then laughed—though there wasn't much humor in it. "You know what's great? You're *serious*. Look at your face." He gestured, as though I actually could examine myself. "You really think it's that easy, that I can sit here and watch your happy ending. That I can watch you getting everything you want as you lead your charmed life."

"Charmed!" The guilt and sympathy warring within me got a little kick of anger. "Hardly. Do you know what I've gone through in the last year?" I'd watched Mason die, fought in the St. Vladimir's attack, been captured by Strigoi in Russia, and then lived on the run as a wanted murderess. That didn't sound charmed at all.

"And yet, here you are, triumphant after it all. You survived death and freed yourself from the bond. Lissa's queen. You got the guy and your happily ever after."

I turned my back to him and stalked away. "Adrian, what do you want me to say? I can apologize forever, but there's nothing else I can do here. I never wanted to hurt you; I can't say that enough. But the rest? Do you really expect me to be sad about everything else having worked out? Should I wish I was still accused of murder?"

"No," he said. "I don't want you to suffer. Much. But the next time you're in bed with Belikov, stop a moment and remember that not everyone made out as well as you did."

I turned back to face him. "Adrian, I never—"

"Not just me, little dhampir," he added quietly. "There's been a lot of collateral damage along the way while you battled against the world. I was a victim, obviously. But what about Jill? What happens to her now that you've abandoned her to the royal wolves? And Eddie? Have you thought about him? And where's your Alchemist?"

Every word he slung at me was an arrow, piercing my heart more than the bullets had. The fact that he'd referred to Jill by her name instead of "Jailbait" carried an extra hurt. I was already toting plenty of guilt about her, but the others . . . well, they were a mystery. I'd heard rumors about Eddie but hadn't seen him since my return. He was clear of James's death, but killing a Moroi—when others still thought he might have been brought in alive—carried a heavy stigma. Eddie's previous insubordination—thanks to me—also damned him, even if it had all been for "the greater good." As queen, Lissa could only do so much. The guardians served the Moroi, but it was customary for the Moroi to step back and let the guardians manage their own people. Eddie wasn't being dismissed or imprisoned . . . but what assignment would they give him? Hard to say.

Sydney . . . she was an even greater mystery. *Where's your Alchemist?* The goings-on of that group were beyond me, beyond my world. I remembered her face that last time I'd seen her, back in the hotel—strong but sad. I knew she and the other Alchemists had been released since then, but her expression had

said she wasn't out of trouble yet.

And Victor Dashkov? Where did he fit in? I wasn't sure. Evil or not, he was still someone who'd suffered as a result of my actions, and the events surrounding his death would stay with me forever.

Collateral damage. I'd brought down a lot of people with me, intentionally or no. But, as Adrian's words continued sinking into me, one of them suddenly gave me pause.

"Victim," I said slowly. "That's the difference between you and me."

"Huh?" He'd been watching me closely while I'd considered the fates of my friends and was caught off guard now. "What are you talking about?"

"You said you were a victim. That's why . . . that's why ultimately, you and I aren't matched for each other. In spite of everything that's happened, I've never thought of myself that way. Being a victim means you're powerless. That you won't take action. Always . . . always I've done something to fight for myself . . . for others. No matter what."

I'd never seen such outrage on Adrian's face. "That's what you think of me? That I'm lazy? Powerless?"

Not exactly. But I had a feeling that after this conversation, he would run off to the comfort of his cigarettes and alcohol and maybe whatever female company he could find.

"No," I said. "I think you're amazing. I think you're strong. But I don't think you've realized it—or learned how to use any of that." And, I wanted to add, I wasn't the person who could inspire that in him.

"This," he said, moving toward the door, "was the last thing I expected. You destroy my life and then feed me inspirational philosophy."

I felt horrible, and it was one of those moments where I wished my mouth wouldn't just blurt out the first thing on my mind. I'd learned a lot of control—but not quite enough.

"I'm just telling you the truth. You're better than this . . . better than whatever it is you're going to do now."

Adrian rested his hand on the doorknob and gave me a rueful look. "Rose, I'm an addict with no work ethic who's likely going to go insane. I'm not like you. I'm not a superhero."

"Not yet," I said.

He scoffed, shook his head, and opened the door. Just before leaving, he gave me one more backward glance. "The contract's null and void, by the way."

I felt like I'd been slapped in the face. And in one of those rare moments, Rose Hathaway was rendered speechless. I had no witty quips, no elaborate explanations, and no profound insight.

Adrian left, and I wondered if I'd ever see him again.

THIRTY-SIX

I'D OFTEN DREAMED ABOUT waking up with Dimitri, waking up in a way that was... ordinary. Sweet. Not because we were hastily trying to catch sleep before fighting our next foe. Not because we were recovering from sex we had to hide, sex laden with baggage and myriad complications. I just wanted to wake up together, in his arms, and have it be a good morning.

Today was that day.

"How long have you been awake?" I asked drowsily. My head was on his chest, and I was wrapped against him as best as I could manage. My wounds were healing rapidly but still had to be babied. We'd found a few creative workarounds last night. Sunlight now spilled in through the windows, filling my bedroom with gold.

He was watching me in that quiet, solemn way of his, with those dark eyes that were so easy to get lost in. "A little while," he admitted, lifting his gaze to the sunlight-filled window. "I think I'm still on a human schedule. Either that, or my body just wants to be up when the sun is. Seeing it is still amazing to me."

I stifled a yawn. "You should have gotten up."

"I didn't want to disturb you."

I ran my fingers over his chest, sighing in contentment. "This is perfection," I said. "Is every day going to be like this?"

Dimitri rested his hand on my cheek and then moved down, tipping my chin up. "Not every day but most days."

Our lips met, and the warmth and light in the room paled compared to what burned inside me. "I was wrong," I murmured when we finally broke the long, languid kiss. "*This* is perfection."

He smiled, something he was doing an awful lot of lately. I loved it. Things would probably change once we were back out in the world. Even if we were together now, Dimitri's guardian side would always be there, ready and watchful. But not right now. Not in this moment.

"What's the matter?" he asked me.

With a start, I realized I'd begun to frown. I tried to relax my face. Unbidden, Adrian's words had come back to me, that the next time I was in bed with Dimitri, I should think about others who weren't so lucky.

"Do you think I ruin lives?" I asked.

"What? Of course not." The smile changed to shock. "Where would you get that idea?"

I shrugged. "There are just a lot of people whose lives are still kind of a mess. My friends, I mean."

"True," he said. "And let me guess. You want to fix everyone's problems."

I didn't answer.

Dimitri kissed me again. "Roza," he said, "it's normal to want to help the people you love. But you can't fix everything."

"It's what I do," I countered, feeling a little petulant. "I protect people."

"I know, and that's one of the reasons I love you. But for now, you only have to worry about protecting one person: Lissa."

I stretched out against him, noticing my injuries really were constantly improving. My body would be able to do all sorts of things soon. "I suppose that means we can't stay in bed all day?" I asked hopefully.

"Afraid not," he said, lightly running his fingertips along the curve of my hip. He never seemed to get tired of studying my body. "They come first."

I brought my mouth back toward his. "But not for a little while."

"No," he agreed. His hand slid up to the back of my neck, tangling in my hair as he drew me closer. "Not for a little while."

I had never attended a royal coronation before, and honestly, I hoped I never would again. I only wanted there to be this one queen ruling in my lifetime.

Eerily, the coronation was kind of a reverse of Tatiana's funeral. What was the old saying? *The queen is dead. Long live the queen.*

Custom dictated the monarch-to-be spend the first part of the coronation day at the church, presumably to pray for guidance, strength, and all that spiritual stuff. I wasn't sure what custom did in the case of atheist monarchs. Probably they faked it. With Lissa, who was fairly devout, I knew that wasn't a problem and that she was probably legitimately praying she'd do a good job as queen.

After the vigil, Lissa and a huge procession walked back across Court to the palace building, where the crowning took place. Representatives from all the royal families joined her, along with musicians who were playing much more cheerful tunes than they had for Tatiana's procession. Lissa's guardians—she had a fleet now—walked with her. I was among them, wearing my finest black and white, including the red collar marking me as a royal guardian. Here, at least, was a notable difference from the funeral. Tatiana had been dead; her guardians were for show. Lissa was very much alive, and even if she'd won the Council's vote, she still had enemies. My colleagues and I were on high alert.

Not that you'd think we needed to be, not with the way the onlookers cheered. All those who had camped out during the trials and election had stayed for this fanfare, and more had shown up still. I wasn't sure when there'd ever been this many Moroi in one place.

After the long and winding walk, Lissa made it to the palace building and then waited in a small antechamber adjacent to what served as the Moroi throne room. The throne room was almost never used for modern business, but every once in a while—like a new queen being sworn in—the Moroi liked to pull out ancient traditions. The room was small and couldn't hold all the

witnesses from outside. It couldn't even hold the entire procession. But, the Council and highest-ranking royal members were there, along with some select invitees of Lissa's.

I stood off to the side, watching the glamour unfold. Lissa hadn't made her grand entrance yet, so there was a low hum of conversation. The room was all green and gold, having been given a thorough and fast remodel in the last few days, since custom dictated the ruling family's colors dominate the throne room. The throne itself sat high against the far wall, accessible by steps. Carved of wood I could no longer identify, I knew the throne had been carried around the world by Moroi monarchs for centuries. People were lining up in carefully assigned positions, preparing for when Lissa would enter last. I was studying one of the new chandeliers, admiring how realistic the "candles" in it looked. I knew they were electric, but the craftsmen had done amazing work. Technology masked in old-world glory, just as the Moroi liked. A small nudge drew my attention away.

"Well, well, well," I said. "If it isn't the people responsible for unleashing Rose Hathaway on the world. You've got a lot to answer for."

My parents stood before me in their typical and wildly contrasting clothing. My mom wore the same guardian outfit I did, a white shirt with black slacks and jacket. Abe was . . . well, Abe. He had on a black pinstripe suite, with a black dress shirt underneath. Splashed against the darkness was a bright, lemon-yellow paisley tie. A matching handkerchief peeped out one of the jacket's pockets. Along with his gold earrings and chains, he also wore a black fedora, which was a new addition to his outlandish wardrobe. I guess he wanted to go all out for an event like this, and at least it wasn't a pirate hat.

"Don't blame us," said my mother. "We didn't blow up half of Court, steal a dozen cars, call out a murderer in the middle of a crowd, or get our teenage friend crowned queen."

"Actually," said Abe, "I *did* blow up half of Court."

My mom ignored him, her expression softening as she studied me with her guardian eyes. "Seriously . . . how are you feeling?" I'd seen them only briefly in the days since waking up, just enough for us all to check in on each other. "You're doing an awful lot of standing today. And I've already told Hans not to put you on active duty for a while."

It was one of the most motherly things I'd ever heard her say. "I . . . I'm fine. A lot better. I could go on active duty right now."

"You will do no such thing," she said, in exactly the tone she'd use giving orders to a troop of guardians.

"Stop coddling her, Janine."

"I'm not coddling her! I'm looking out for her. You're spoiling her."

I looked back and forth at them in amazement. I didn't know if I was witnessing a fight or foreplay. I wasn't thrilled about either option. "Okay, okay, just back off you guys. I survived, right? That's what counts."

"It is," said Abe. He suddenly seemed very fatherly, which weirded me out even more than my mom's behavior. "And despite the property damage and string of broken laws left in your wake, I'm proud of you." I suspected that secretly, he was proud of me *because* of those things. My cynical interior commentary was brought to a halt when my mom concurred.

"I'm proud too. Your methods were . . . not ideal, but you did a great thing. Great *things*, really. Finding both the murderer and Jill." I noticed her careful wording of "the murderer." I think it was still hard for all of us to accept the truth about Tasha. "A lot will change because of Jill."

All of us looked over at the foot of the throne. Ekaterina stood on one side, ready with the book of royal vows. The other side was where members of the monarch's family stood—but only one lone person was there. Jill. Someone had done a great job of cleaning her up. Her curly hair had been elaborately styled and pinned, and she wore a knee-length sheath dress with a wide portrait style collar, just barely showing off her shoulders. The dress's cut made the most of her lanky figure, and the dark green satin looked great with her features. She was standing straight, chin high, but there was anxiety all over her, made more obvious by her being so conspicuously alone.

I glanced back at Abe, who met my eyes expectantly. I had a lot of questions for him, and he was one of the few who might tell me the truth. The decision was: which question to ask? It was like having a genie. I'd only get so many wishes.

"What will happen to Jill?" I asked at last. "Will she just go back to school? Are they going to train her to be a princess?" Lissa couldn't be both princess and queen, so her old title went to the next-oldest member of her family.

Abe didn't answer for several moments. "Until Lissa can get the law changed—and hopefully, she will—Jill is all that allows her to keep her throne. If something happens to Jill, Lissa will no longer be queen. So. What would you do?"

"I'd keep her safe."

"Then you have your answer."

"It's kind of a broad one," I said. "'Safe' means a lot of things."

"Ibrahim," warned my mother. "Enough. This isn't the time or place."

Abe held my gaze a bit longer and then broke into an easy smile. "Of course, of course. This is a family gathering. A celebration. And look: here's our newest member."

Dimitri had joined us and wore black and white like my mother and me. He stood beside me, conspicuously not touching. "Mr. Mazur," he said formally, nodding a greeting to both of them. "Guardian Hathaway." Dimitri was seven years older than me, but right then, facing my parents, he looked like he was sixteen and about to pick me up for a date.

"Ah, Belikov," said Abe, shaking Dimitri's hand. "I'd been hoping we'd run into each other. I'd really like to get to know you better. Maybe we can set aside some time to talk, learn more about life, love, et cetera. Do you like to hunt? You seem like a hunting man. That's what we should do sometime. I know a great spot in the woods. Far, far away. We could make a day of it. I've certainly got a lot of questions I'd like to ask you. A lot of things I'd like to tell you too."

I shot a panicked look at my mother, silently begging her to stop this. Abe had spent a good deal of time talking to Adrian when we dated, explaining in vivid and gruesome detail exactly how Abe expected his daughter to be treated. I did not want Abe taking Dimitri off alone into the wilderness, especially if firearms were involved.

"Actually," said my mom casually. "I'd like to come along. I also have a number of questions—especially about when you two were back at St. Vladimir's."

"Don't you guys have somewhere to be?" I asked hastily. "We're about to start."

That, at least, was true. Nearly everyone was in formation, and the crowd was quieting. "Of course," said Abe. To my astonishment, he brushed a kiss over my forehead before stepping away. "I'm glad you're back." Then, with a wink, he said to Dimitri: "Looking forward to our chat."

"Run," I said when they were gone. "If you slip out now, maybe they won't notice. Go back to Siberia."

"Actually," said Dimitri, "I'm pretty sure Abe *would* notice. Don't worry, Roza. I'm not afraid. I'll take whatever heat they give me over being with you. It's worth it."

"You really are the bravest man I know," I told him.

He smiled, his eyes falling on a small commotion at the room's entrance. "Looks like she's ready," he murmured.

"I hope I am," I whispered back.

In true grandiose fashion, a herald brought the room to attention. Perfect silence fell. You couldn't even hear breathing.

The herald stepped back from the door. "Princess Vasilisa Sabina Rhea Dragomir."

Lissa entered, and even though I'd seen her less than half an hour ago, I still caught my breath. She was wearing a formal gown but had once again dodged sleeves. No doubt the dress-maker had had a fit. The dress was floor-length, with a skirt of silk and chiffon layers that moved and fluttered around Lissa as she strode forward. The fabric was the same jade as her eyes, as was the dress's top, with a halter collar covered in emeralds that gave the illusion of a necklace. Matching emeralds covered the dress's belt, and bracelets completed the display. Her hair was worn long, brushed out to gleaming, platinum perfection, an aura unto itself.

Christian walked beside her, a sharp contrast with his black hair and dark suit. Customs were being modified significantly today since a family member normally would have escorted Lissa, but . . . well, she was kind of running out. Even I had to admit he looked amazing, and his pride and love for her shone on his face—no matter what troubled feelings stirred within him over Tasha. *Lord Ozera*, I remembered. I had a feeling that title would become more and more important now. He led Lissa to the base of the throne and then joined the Ozera delegation in the crowd.

Ekaterina made a small gesture to a large satin pillow on the floor in front of the steps. "Kneel."

There was the briefest hesitation on Lissa's part, one I think only I noticed. Even without the bond, I was so attuned to her mood and tiniest actions that I could pick up on these things. Her eyes had gone to Jill. Lissa's expression didn't change, and it was so strange not to know her feelings. I could make some educated guesses. Uncertainty. Confusion.

Again—the pause was only a moment long. Lissa knelt, artfully spreading her skirts around her as she did. Ekaterina had always seemed so frail and

wizened in that testing room, but as she stood there with the ancient Moroi coronation book, I could sense a power still within the former queen.

The book was in Romanian, but Ekaterina translated it effortlessly as she read aloud, beginning with a speech about what was expected of a monarch and then going to the vows Lissa had to swear to.

"Will you serve?"

"Will you protect your people?"

"Will you be just?"

There were twelve in all, and Lissa had to answer "I will" three times to each one: in English, in Russian, and in Romanian. Not having the bond to confirm her feelings was still so strange, but I could see on her face that she meant every word she said. When that part finished, Ekaterina cued Jill forward. Since I'd last noticed the girl, someone had given her the crown to hold. It had been custom-made for Lissa, a masterpiece of white and yellow gold intertwined with emeralds and diamonds. It complemented her outfit beautifully, and, I noticed with a start, Jill did too.

Another tradition was that the monarch was crowned by a family member, and this was what Jill had been saved for. I could see her hands tremble as she laid the bejeweled wonder on her sister's head, and their gazes met briefly. A flash of troubled emotions swirled in Lissa's eyes once more, gone quickly as Jill stepped back and the weight of the ceremony took precedence.

Ekaterina held out her hand to Lissa. "Rise," she said. "You will never kneel to anyone again." Holding Lissa's hand, Ekaterina turned so that they both faced the rest of us in the room. With a voice startling for her small body, Ekaterina declared, "Queen Vasilisa Sabina Rhea Dragomir, first of her name."

Everyone in the room—except Ekaterina—dropped to their knees, heads bowed. Only a few seconds passed before Lissa said, "Rise." I'd been told this was at the monarch's discretion. Some new kings and queens enjoyed making others kneel for a long time.

Paperwork followed, which we all watched dutifully as well. Basically, it was Lissa signing to say she'd been made queen while Ekaterina and a couple witnesses signed that they'd seen Lissa made queen. Three copies were on the ornate paper Moroi royalty so loved. One was plain white letterhead, which would go to the Alchemists.

When the signing was done, Lissa took her place on the throne, and seeing her ascend those stairs was breathtaking, an image that would stay with me for the rest of my life. The room broke out into cheers and clapping as she settled into the ornate chair. Even the guardians, who normally stayed so deadly serious, joined in the applause and celebration. Lissa smiled at everyone, hiding whatever anxiety she felt.

She scanned the room, and her grin broadened when she saw Christian. She then sought me out. Her smile for him had been affectionate; mine was a bit humorous. I smiled back, wondering what she would say to me if she could.

"What's so funny?" asked Dimitri, looking down at me with amusement.

"I'm just thinking about what Lissa would say if we still had the bond."

In a very bad breach of guardian protocol, he caught a hold of my hand and pulled me toward him. "And?" he asked, wrapping me in an embrace.

"I think she'd ask, ‘What have we gotten ourselves into?'"

"What's the answer?" His warmth was all around me, as was his love, and again, I felt that completeness. I had that missing piece of my world back. The soul that complemented mine. My match. My equal. Not only that, I had my life back—my *own* life. I would protect Lissa, I would serve, but I was finally my own person.

"I don't know," I said, leaning against his chest. "But I think it's going to be good."

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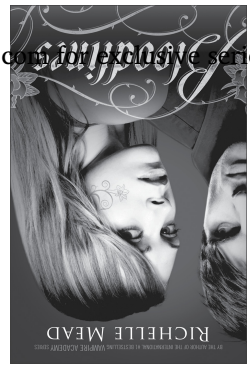

CHAPTER 1

I COULDN'T BREATHE.

There was a hand covering my mouth and another shaking my shoulder, startling me out of a heavy sleep. A thousand frantic thoughts dashed through my mind in the space of a single heartbeat. It was happening. My worst nightmare was coming true.

They're here! They've come for me!

My eyes blinked, staring wildly around the dark room until my father's face came into focus. I stilled my thrashing, thoroughly confused. He let go and stepped back to regard me coldly. I sat up in the bed, my heart still pounding.

"Dad?"

"Sydney. You wouldn't wake up."

Naturally, that was his only apology for scaring me to death.

"You need to get dressed and make yourself presentable," he continued. "Quickly and quietly. Meet me downstairs in the study."

I felt my eyes widen but didn't hesitate with a response. There was only one acceptable answer. "Yes, sir. Of course."

"I'll go wake your sister." He turned for the door, and I leapt out of bed.

"Zoe?" I exclaimed. "What do you need her for?"

"Shh," he chastised. "Hurry up and get ready. And remember—be quiet. Don't wake your mother."

He shut the door without another word, leaving me staring. The panic that had only just subsided began to surge within me again. What did he need Zoe for? A late-night wake-up meant Alchemist business, and she had nothing to do with that. Technically, neither did I anymore, not since I'd been put on indefinite suspension for bad behavior this summer. What if that's what this was about? What if I was finally being taken to a re-education center and Zoe was replacing me?

For a moment, the world swam around me, and I caught hold of my bed to steady myself. Re-education centers. They were the stuff of nightmares for young Alchemists like me, mysterious places where those who grew too close to vampires were dragged off to learn the errors of their ways. What exactly went on there was a secret, one I never wanted to find out. I was pretty sure "re-education" was a nice way of saying "brainwashing." I'd only ever seen one

person who had come back, and honestly, he'd seemed like half a person after that. There'd been an almost zombielike quality to him, and I didn't even want to think about what they might have done to make him that way.

My father's urging to hurry up echoed back through my mind, and I tried to shake off my fears. Remembering his other warning, I also made sure I moved silently. My mother was a light sleeper. Normally, it wouldn't matter if she caught us going off on Alchemist errands, but lately, she hadn't been feeling so kindly toward her husband's (and daughter's) employers. Ever since angry Alchemists had deposited me on my parents' doorstep last month, this household had held all the warmth of a prison camp. Terrible arguments had gone down between my parents, and my sister Zoe and I often found ourselves tiptoeing around.

Zoe.

Why does he need Zoe?

The question burned through me as I scurried to get ready. I knew what "presentable" meant. Throwing on jeans and a T-shirt was out of the question. Instead, I tugged on gray slacks and a crisp, white button-down shirt. A darker, charcoal gray cardigan went over it, which I cinched neatly at my waist with a black belt. A small gold cross—the one I always wore around my neck—was the only ornamentation I ever bothered with.

My hair was a slightly bigger problem. Even after only two hours of sleep, it was already going in every direction. I smoothed it down as best I could and then coated it with a thick layer of hair spray in the hopes that it would get me through whatever was to come. A light dusting of powder was the only makeup I put on. I had no time for anything more.

The entire process took me all of six minutes, which might have been a new record for me. I sprinted down the stairs in perfect silence, careful, again, to avoid waking my mother. The living room was dark, but light spilled out past the not-quite-shut door of my father's study. Taking that as an invitation, I pushed the door open and slipped inside. A hushed conversation stopped at my entrance. My father eyed me from head to toe and showed his approval at my appearance in the way he knew best: by simply withholding criticism.

"Sydney," he said brusquely. "I believe you know Donna Stanton."

The formidable Alchemist stood near the window, arms crossed, looking as tough and lean as I remembered. I'd spent a lot of time with Stanton recently, though I would hardly say we were friends—especially since certain actions of mine had ended up putting the two of us under a sort of "vampire house arrest." If she harbored any resentment toward me, she didn't show it, though. She nodded to me in polite greeting, her face all business.

Three other Alchemists were there as well, all men. They were introduced to me as Barnes, Michaelson, and Horowitz. Barnes and Michaelson were my father and Stanton's age. Horowitz was younger, mid-twenties, and was setting up a tattooist's tools. All of them were dressed like me, wearing business casual clothing in nondescript colors. Our goal was always to look nice but not attract notice. The Alchemists had been playing Men in Black for centuries, long before humans dreamed of life on other worlds. When the light hit their faces the right way, each Alchemist displayed a lily tattoo identical to mine.

Again, my unease grew. Was this some kind of interrogation? An assessment

to see if my decision to help a renegade half-vampire girl meant my loyalties had changed? I crossed my arms over my chest and schooled my face to neutrality, hoping I looked cool and confident. If I still had a chance to plead my case, I intended to present a solid one.

Before anyone could utter another word, Zoe entered. She shut the door behind her and peered around in terror, her eyes wide. Our father's study was huge—he'd built an addition on to our house for it—and it easily held all the occupants. But as I watched my sister take in the scene, I knew she felt stifled and trapped. I met her eyes and tried to send a silent message of sympathy. It must have worked because she scurried to my side, looking only fractionally less afraid.

"Zoe," said my father. He let her name hang in the air in this way he had, making it clear to both of us that he was disappointed. I could immediately guess why. She wore jeans and an old sweatshirt and had her brown hair in two cute but sloppy braids. By any other person's standards, she would have been "presentable"—but not by his. I felt her cower against me, and I tried to make myself taller and more protective. After making sure his condemnation was felt, our father introduced Zoe to the others. Stanton gave her the same polite nod she'd given me and then turned toward my father.

"I don't understand, Jared," said Stanton. "Which one of them are you going to use?"

"Well, that's the problem," my father said. "Zoe was requested . . . but I'm not sure she's ready. In fact, I know she isn't. She's only had the most basic of training. But in light of Sydney's recent . . . experiences . . ."

My mind immediately began to pull the pieces together. First, and most importantly, it seemed I wasn't going to be sent to a re-education center. Not yet, at least. This was about something else. My earlier suspicion was correct. There was some mission or task afoot, and someone wanted to sub in Zoe because she, unlike certain other members of her family, had no history of betraying the Alchemists. My father was right that she'd only received basic instruction. Our jobs were hereditary, and I had been chosen years ago as the next Alchemist in the Sage family. My older sister, Carly, had been passed over and was now away at college and too old. He'd taught Zoe as backup instead, in the event something happened to me, like a car accident or vampire mauling.

I stepped forward, not knowing what I was going to say until I spoke. The only thing I knew for sure was that I could *not* let Zoe get sucked into the Alchemists' schemes. I feared for her safety more than I did going to a re-education center—and I was pretty afraid of that. "I spoke to a committee about my actions after they happened," I said. "I was under the impression that they understood why I did the things I did. I'm fully qualified to serve in whatever way you need—much more so than my sister. I have real-world experience. I know this job inside and out."

"A little too much real-world experience, if memory serves," said Stanton dryly.

"I for one would like to hear these 'reasons' again," said Barnes, using his fingers to make air quotes. "I'm not thrilled about tossing a half-trained girl out there, but I also find it hard to believe someone who aided a vampire criminal is 'fully qualified to serve.'" More pretentious air quotes.

I smiled back pleasantly, masking my anger. If I showed my true emotions, it wouldn't help my case. "I understand, sir. But Rose Hathaway was eventually proven innocent of the crime she'd been accused of. So, I wasn't technically aiding a criminal. My actions eventually helped find the real murderer."

"Be that as it may, we—and you—didn't know she was 'innocent' at the time," he said.

"I know," I said. "But I believed she was."

Barnes snorted. "And there's the problem. You should've believed what the Alchemists told you, not run off with your own far-fetched theories. At the very least, you should've taken what evidence you'd gathered to your superiors."

Evidence? How could I explain that it wasn't evidence that had driven me to help Rose so much as a feeling in my gut that she was telling the truth? But that was something I knew they'd never understand. All of us were trained to believe the worst of her kind. Telling them that I had seen truth and honesty in her wouldn't help my cause here. Telling them that I'd been blackmailed into helping her by another vampire was an even worse explanation. There was only one argument that the Alchemists might possibly be able to comprehend.

"I . . . I didn't tell anyone because I wanted to get all the credit for it. I was hoping that if I uncovered it, I could get a promotion and a better assignment."

It took every ounce of self-control I had to say that lie straight-faced. I felt humiliated at making such an admission. As though ambition would really drive me to such extreme behaviors! It made me feel slimy and shallow. But, as I'd suspected, this was something the other Alchemists could understand.

Michaelson snorted. "Misguided, but not entirely unexpected for her age."

The other men shared equally condescending looks, even my father. Only Stanton looked doubtful, but then, she'd witnessed more of the fiasco than they had.

My father glanced among the others, waiting for further comment. When none came, he shrugged. "If no one has any objections, then, I'd rather we use Sydney. Not that I even entirely understand what you need her for." There was a slightly accusing tone in his voice over not having been filled in yet. Jared Sage didn't like to be left out of the loop.

"I have no problem with using the older girl," said Barnes. "But keep the younger one around until the others get here, in case they have any objections." I wondered how many "others" would be joining us. My father's study was no stadium. Also, the more people who came, the more important this case probably was. My skin grew cold as I wondered what the assignment could possibly be. I'd seen the Alchemists cover up major disasters with only one or two people. How colossal would something have to be to require this much help?

Horowitz spoke up for the first time. "What do you want me to do?"

"Re-ink Sydney," said Stanton decisively. "Even if she doesn't go, it won't hurt to have the spells reinforced. No point in inking Zoe until we know what we're doing with her."

My eyes flicked to my sister's noticeably bare—and pale—cheeks. Yes. As long as there was no lily there, she was free. Once the tattoo was emblazoned on your skin, there was no going back. You belonged to the Alchemists.

The reality of that had only hit me in the last year or so. I'd certainly never realized it while growing up. My father had dazzled me from a very young age

about the rightness of our duty. I still believed in that rightness but wished he'd also mentioned just how much of my life it would consume.

Horowitz had set up a folding table on the far side of my father's study. He patted it and gave me a friendly smile.

"Step right up," he told me. "Get your ticket."

Barnes shot him a disapproving look. "Please. You could show a little respect for this ritual, David."

Horowitz merely shrugged. He helped me lie down, and though I was too afraid of the others to openly smile back, I hoped my gratitude showed in my eyes. Another smile from him told me he understood. Turning my head, I watched as Barnes reverently set a black briefcase on a side table. The other Alchemists gathered around and clasped their hands together in front of them. He must be the hierophant, I realized. Most of what the Alchemists did was rooted in science, but a few tasks required divine assistance. After all, our core mission to protect humanity was rooted in the belief that vampires were unnatural and went against God's plan. That's why hierophants—our priests—worked side by side with our scientists.

"Oh Lord," he intoned, closing his eyes. "Bless these elixirs. Remove the taint of the evil they carry so that their life-giving power shines through purely to us, your servants."

He opened the briefcase and removed four small vials, each filled with dark red liquid. Labels that I couldn't read marked each one. With a steady hand and practiced eye, Barnes poured precise amounts from each vial into a larger bottle. When he'd used all four, he produced a tiny packet of powder that he emptied into the rest of the mix. I felt a tingle in the air, and the bottle's contents turned to gold. He handed the bottle to Horowitz, who stood ready with a needle. Everyone relaxed, the ceremonial part complete.

I obediently turned away, exposing my cheek. A moment later, Horowitz's shadow fell over me. "This will sting a little, but nothing like when you originally got it. It's just a touch-up," he explained kindly.

"I know," I said. I'd been re-inked before. "Thanks."

The needle pricked my skin, and I tried not to wince. It *did* sting, but like he'd said, Horowitz wasn't creating a new tattoo. He was simply injecting small amounts of the ink into my existing tattoo, recharging its power. I took this as a good sign. Zoe might not be out of danger yet, but surely they wouldn't go to the trouble of re-inking me if they were just going to send me to a re-education center.

"Can you brief us on what's happening while we're waiting?" asked my father. "All I was told was that you needed a teen girl." The way he said "teen girl" made it sound like a disposable role. I fought back a wave of anger at my father. That's all we were to him.

"We have a situation," I heard Stanton say. Finally, I'd get some answers. "With the Moroi."

I breathed a small sigh of relief. Better them than the Strigoi. Any "situation" the Alchemists faced always involved one of the vampire races, and I'd take the living, non-killing ones any day. They almost seemed human at times (though I'd never tell anyone here that) and lived and died like we did. Strigoi, however, were twisted freaks of nature. They were undead, murderous vampires created

either when a Strigoi forcibly made a victim drink its blood or when a Moroi purposely took the life of another through blood drinking. A situation with the Strigoi usually ended with someone dead.

All sorts of possible scenarios played through my mind as I considered what issue had prompted action from the Alchemists tonight: a human who had noticed someone with fangs, a feeder who had escaped and gone public, a Moroi treated by human doctors. . . . Those were the kinds of problems we Alchemists faced the most, ones I had been trained to handle and cover up with ease. Why they would need "a teenage girl" for any of those, however, was a mystery.

"You know that they elected their girl queen last month," said Barnes. I could practically see him rolling his eyes.

Everyone in the room murmured affirmatively. Of course they knew about that. The Alchemists paid careful attention to the political goings-on of the Moroi. Knowing what vampires were doing was crucial to keeping them secret from the rest of humanity—and keeping the rest of humanity safe from them. That was our purpose, to protect our brethren. *Know thy enemy* was taken very seriously with us. The girl the Moroi had elected queen, Vasilisa Dragomir, was eighteen, just like me.

"Don't tense," said Horowitz gently.

I hadn't realized I had been. I tried to relax, but thinking of Vasilisa Dragomir made me think of Rose Hathaway. Uneasily, I wondered if maybe I shouldn't have been so quick to assume I was out of trouble here. Mercifully, Barnes simply kept going with the story, not mentioning my indirect connection to the girl queen and her associates.

"Well, as shocking as that is to us, it's been just as shocking to some of their own people. There's been a lot of protests and dissidence. No one's tried to attack the Dragomir girl, but that's probably because she's so well guarded. Her enemies, it seems, have therefore found a work-around: her sister."

"Jill," I said, speaking before I could stop myself. Horowitz tsked me for moving, and I immediately regretted drawing attention to myself and my knowledge of the Moroi. Nevertheless, an image of Jillian Mastrano flashed into my mind, tall and annoyingly slim like all Moroi, with big, pale green eyes that always seemed nervous. And she had good reason to be. At fifteen, Jill had discovered she was Vasilisa's illegitimate sister, making her the only other member of their royal family's line. She too was tied to the mess I'd gotten myself into this summer.

"You know their laws," continued Stanton, after a moment of awkward silence. Her tone conveyed what we all thought of Moroi laws. An elected monarch? It made no sense, but what else could one expect from unnatural beings like vampires? "And Vasilisa must have one family member in order to hold her throne. Therefore, her enemies have decided if they can't directly remove her, they'll remove her family."

A chill ran down my spine at the unspoken meaning, and I again commented without thinking. "Did something happen to Jill?" This time, I'd at least chosen a moment when Horowitz was refilling his needle, so there was no danger of messing up the tattoo.

I bit my lip to prevent myself from saying anything else, imagining the chastisement in my father's eyes. Showing concern for a Moroi was the last thing

I wanted to do, considering my uncertain status. I didn't have any strong attachment to Jill, but the thought of someone trying to kill a fifteen-year-old girl —the same age as Zoe—was appalling, no matter what race she belonged to.

"That's what's unclear," Stanton mused. "She was attacked, we know that much, but we can't tell if she received any real injury. Regardless, she's fine now, but the attempt happened at their own Court, indicating they have traitors at high levels."

Barnes snorted in disgust. "What can you expect? How their ridiculous race has managed to survive as long as they have without turning on each other is beyond me."

There were mutters of agreement.

"Ridiculous or not, though, we *cannot* have them in civil war," said Stanton. "Some Moroi have acted out in protest, enough that they've caught the attention of human media. We can't allow that. We need their government stable, and that means ensuring this girl's safety. Maybe they can't trust themselves, but they can trust us."

There was no use in my pointing out that the Moroi didn't really trust the Alchemists. But, since we had no interest in killing off the Moroi monarch or her family, I supposed that made us more trustworthy than some.

"We need to make the girl disappear," said Michaelson. "At least until the Moroi can undo the law that makes Vasilisa's throne so precarious. Hiding Mastrano with her own people isn't safe at the moment, so we need to conceal her among humans." Disdain dripped from his words. "But it's imperative she also remains concealed *from* humans. Our race cannot know theirs exists."

"After consultation with the guardians, we've chosen a location we all believe will be safe for her—both from Moroi and Strigoi," said Stanton. "However, to make sure she—and those with her—remain undetected, we're going to need Alchemists on hand, dedicated solely to her needs in case any complications come up."

My father scoffed. "That's a waste of our resources. Not to mention unbearable for whoever has to stay with her."

I had a bad feeling about what was coming.

"This is where Sydney comes in," said Stanton. "We'd like her to be one of the Alchemists that accompanies Jillian into hiding."

"What?" exclaimed my father. "You can't be serious."

"Why not?" Stanton's tone was calm and level. "They're close in age, so being together won't raise suspicion. And Sydney already knows the girl. Surely spending time with her won't be as 'unbearable' as it might be for other Alchemists."

The subtext was loud and clear. I wasn't free of my past, not yet. Horowitz paused and lifted the needle, allowing me the chance to speak. My mind raced. Some response was expected. I didn't want to sound too upset by the plan. I needed to restore my good name among the Alchemists and show my willingness to follow orders. That being said, I also didn't want to sound as though I were too comfortable with vampires or their half-human counterparts, the dhampirs.

"Spending time with any of them is never fun," I said carefully, keeping my voice cool and haughty. "Doesn't matter how much you do it. But I'll do whatever's necessary to keep us—and everyone else—safe." I didn't need to

explain that “everyone” meant humans.

“There, you see, Jared?” Barnes sounded pleased with the answer. “The girl knows her duty. We’ve made a number of arrangements already that should make things run smoothly, and we certainly wouldn’t send her there alone—especially since the Moroi girl won’t be alone either.”

“What do you mean?” My father still didn’t sound happy about any of this, and I wondered what was upsetting him the most. Did he truly think *I* might be in danger? Or was he simply worried that spending more time with the Moroi would turn my loyalties even more? “How many of them are coming?”

“They’re sending a dhampir,” said Michaelson. “One of their guardians, which I really don’t have a problem with. The location we’ve chosen should be Strigoi free, but if it’s not, better *they* fight those monsters than us.” The guardians were specially trained dhampirs who served as bodyguards.

“There you are,” Horowitz told me, stepping back. “You can sit up.”

I obeyed and resisted the urge to touch my cheek. The only thing I felt from his work was the needle’s sting, but I knew powerful magic was working its way through me, magic that would give me a superhuman immune system and prevent me from speaking about vampire affairs to ordinary humans. I tried not to think about the other part, about where that magic came from. The tattoos were a necessary evil.

The others were still standing, not paying attention to me—well, except for Zoe. She still looked confused and afraid and kept glancing anxiously my way.

“There also may be another Moroi coming along,” continued Stanton. “Honestly, I’m not sure why, but they were very insistent he be with Mastrano. We told them the fewer of them we had to hide, the better, but . . . well, they seemed to think it was necessary and said they’d make arrangements for him there. I think he’s some Ivashkov. Irrelevant.”

“Where *is* there?” asked my father. “Where do you want to send her?”

Excellent question. I’d been wondering the same thing. My first full-time job with the Alchemists had sent me halfway around the world, to Russia. If the Alchemists were intent on hiding Jill, there was no telling what remote location they’d send her to. For a moment, I dared to hope we might end up in my dream city: Rome. Legendary works of art and Italian food seemed like a good way to offset paperwork and vampires.

“Palm Springs,” said Barnes.

“Palm Springs?” I echoed. That was *not* what I’d been expecting. When I thought of Palm Springs, I thought of movie stars and golf courses. Not exactly a Roman holiday, but not the Arctic either.

A small, wry smile tugged at Stanton’s lips. “It’s in the desert and receives a lot of sunlight. Completely undesirable for Strigoi.”

“Wouldn’t it be undesirable for Moroi too?” I asked, thinking ahead. Moroi didn’t incinerate in the sun like Strigoi, but excessive exposure to it still made Moroi weak and sick.

“Well, yes,” admitted Stanton. “But a little discomfort is worth the safety it provides. So long as the Moroi spend most of their time inside, it won’t be a problem. Plus, it’ll discourage other Moroi from coming and—”

The sound of a car door opening and slamming outside the window caught everyone’s attention. “Ah,” said Michaelson. “There are the others. I’ll let them

in."

He slipped out of the study and presumably headed toward the front door to admit whoever had arrived. Moments later, I heard a new voice speaking as Michaelson returned to us.

"Well, Dad couldn't make it, so he just sent me," the new voice was saying.

The study door opened, and my heart stopped.

No, I thought. *Anyone but him.*

"Jared," said the newcomer, catching sight of my father. "Great to see you again."

My father, who had barely spared me a glance all night, actually *smiled*. "Keith! I'd been wondering how you've been." The two of them shook hands, and a wave of disgust rolled through me.

"This is Keith Darnell," said Michaelson, introducing him to the others.

"Tom Darnell's son?" asked Barnes, impressed. Tom Darnell was a legendary leader among the Alchemists.

"The same," said Keith cheerfully. He was about five years older than me, with blond hair a shade lighter than mine. I knew a lot of girls thought he was attractive. Me? I found him vile. He was pretty much the last person I'd expected to see here.

"And I believe you know the Sage sisters," added Michaelson.

Keith turned his blue eyes first to Zoe, eyes that were just fractionally different from each other in color. One eye, made of glass, stared blankly ahead and didn't move at all. The other one winked at her as his grin widened.

He can still wink, I thought furiously. *That annoying, stupid, condescending wink!* But then, why wouldn't he? We'd all heard about the accident he'd had this year, an accident that had cost him an eye. He'd still survived with one good one, but somehow, in my mind, I'd thought the loss of an eye would stop that infuriating winking.

"Little Zoe! Look at you, all grown up," he said fondly. I'm not a violent person, not by any means, but I suddenly wanted to hit him for looking at my sister that way.

She managed a smile for him, clearly relieved to see a familiar face here. When Keith turned toward me, however, all that charm and friendliness vanished. The feeling was mutual.

The burning, black hatred building up inside of me was so overwhelming that it took me a moment to formulate any sort of response. "Hello, Keith," I said stiffly.

Keith didn't even attempt to match my forced civility. He immediately turned toward the senior Alchemists. "What is *she* doing here?"

"We know you requested Zoe," said Stanton levelly, "but after consideration, we decided it would be best if Sydney fulfill this role. Her experience dwarfs any concerns about her past actions."

"No," said Keith swiftly, turning that steely blue gaze back on me. "There is no way she can come, no way I'm trusting some twisted *vamp lover* to screw this up for all of us. We're taking her sister."

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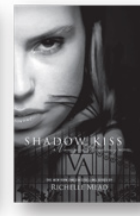

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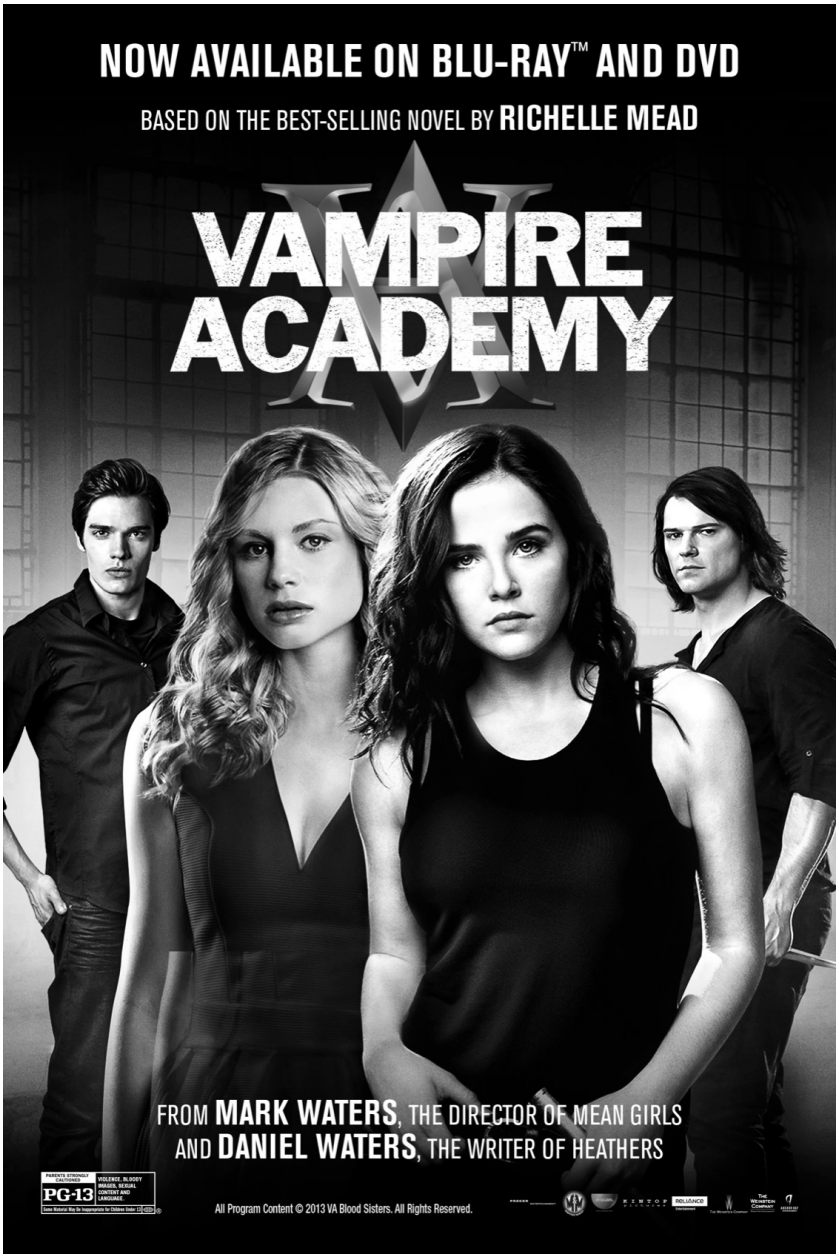
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